

**“IN DREAMS BEGINS RESPONSIBILITY”: THE ROLE OF IRISH  
DRAMA AND THE ABBEY THEATRE IN THE FORMATION OF  
POST-COLONIAL IRISH IDENTITY**

A Dissertation

by

REBECCA LYNN STOUT

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2006

Major Subject: English

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## ABSTRACT

“In Dreams Begins Responsibility:” The Role of Irish Drama and the Abbey Theatre in  
the Formation of Post-Colonial Irish Identity. (May 2006)

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This research does not hope to give a finalized portrait of Ireland and its vast and diverse people. Instead, it hopes to add one more piece to the complicated mosaic that is an honest depiction of Irish personal and national identity. Several plays by authors considered to be quintessential Irish nationalists have been read in conjunction with those authors’ biographies and the historical moments in which those plays were created, to offer a multi-faceted perspective to the intersection between art, politics and individual senses of personhood and nation. The final conclusion is that the growth and development of a nation requires that the definition of national identity be in a constant state of performance and revision.

Several key conclusions can be drawn from the findings here. First, Irish identity is slippery and elusive. To try to finalize a definition is to stunt the growth of a constantly evolving nation. Secondly, personal and national identity formation cannot be separated into two distinct processes. Due to the unique political situation leading up to Irish independence and the subjugated state of all Irish people, regardless of their class or economic distinction, an individual always exists in relationship to those other

members of his or her class, as well as those who define him or her by their differences. Finally, because of this constantly evolving state and this complicated interrelationship between the personal and the public, Irish stage drama bears a unique relationship to Ireland, and to critics seeking to analyze that literature. The multiplicity of the Irish experience demonstrates itself most clearly in the consistent newness of repeated performances of its classic texts.

By examining the historical ruptures that resulted from the initial performances of those texts and comparing them to the texts themselves, documents that live outside of history until they are drawn back in by those who seek to reinterpret and re-perform them, researchers can witness the evolution of key ideas of Irish nationalism from their roots in personal experience, through the interpretive machine of the early Abbey audiences, and as they continue to transform in modern presentations.

## DEDICATION

To Tim

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: THE THEATRE OF POLITICS

The Irish theatrical experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was, at best, a conflicted one. Nationalism drove both the popular and the political fronts in Ireland, manifesting itself in numerous ways. The Home Rule movement, officially founded in 1870, offered a legitimate political outlet to nationalist sentiments. At the same time, popular support of nationalist ideals appeared in every other aspect of Irish life, dominating both newspapers and magazines, as well as the Irish-authored literary and dramatic arts. As W.B. Yeats was to write in a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* dated 15 July 1913:

There is a moment in the history of every nation when it is plastic, when it is like wax, when it is ready to hold for generations the shape that is given to it. Ireland is now plastic, and will be for . . . years to come . . . if the intellectual movement is defeated Ireland will for many years become a little huckstering nation, groping for halfpence in a greasy till. It is that, or the fulfillment of her better dreams. The choice is yours and ours.<sup>1</sup>

W.B. Yeats and his contemporaries hoped that the power to fulfill those “better dreams” rested in their own hands, and in their version of a national theatre. What was to become the Abbey Theatre, fueled by the passions and determination of its founders, its performers and of its audience was to have a profound effect on this malleable Ireland, shaping and reshaping it as it evolved into an independent nation.

The political and personal passions of the Irish people developed and changed significantly during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As Yeats said, “there was a time

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This dissertation follows the style of *Modernism/Modernity*.

<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life Vol. 1 – The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 494; hereafter cited as *YL*.

when every young man in Ireland asked himself if he were not willing to die for his country. Ireland was his sweetheart, his mistress, the love of his life, for whom he faced death triumphantly.” Eventually, however, that romantic and youthful passion changed. “The boy who used to want to die for Ireland now goes into a rage because the dispensary doctor in County Clare has been elected by a fraud. Ireland is no longer a sweetheart but a house to be set in order” (YL, 513). Ireland grew up in the fifty years surrounding its independence and the theatre both reflected and facilitated that growth. The purpose of this research is to investigate in what fashion the Abbey Theatre aided in that process and what ultimate effect it had. Several key Abbey plays will be analyzed and their historical effects examined. The end result should be a further illumination of how a post-colonial people dealt with identity formation throughout the process of independence and the role of art in that process.

The fervent political sentiments described above were not necessarily echoed in what the Irish audience actually *saw* on stage when they attended theatrical performances, prior to the advent of the Abbey Theatre.<sup>2</sup> Christopher Morash, in his book entitled *The History of Irish Theatre*, explains that at the time an increased number of English and American theatrical touring companies, representing entirely *different* types of nationalism, were making active use of the more and more easily accessible

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<sup>2</sup> The Irish National Theatre Society was formed by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, AE, Edward Martyn and J.M. Synge in 1903. It took possession of its formal residence on the corner of Abbey and Marlborough Streets in Dublin when Annie Horniman agreed to fund the theatrical venture. On 27 December 1904 the Abbey first opened its doors to the paying public. The Abbey eventually expanded into two theatres, the Abbey Theatre for commercially viable performances and the adjoining Peacock Theatre for *avant garde* experimental plays. In 1951 the Abbey theatre was destroyed by fire, and temporarily moved to the site of the Queen’s Theatre. It was not until 1966 that the fire-damaged theatre was destroyed and rebuilt, and the Abbey reclaimed its original site on 18 July 1966. Both the Abbey Theatre and the Peacock are open to the public to this day.

railroad and steamship traveling routes.<sup>3</sup> These touring companies frequently visited Ireland, expanding the center of theatrical life beyond Dublin to other major cities such as Belfast and Cork, and sometimes to smaller venues like Limerick or Waterford.

These companies so dominated the various Irish stages that there was very little room left for plays by Irish authors and performers. Instead, an Irish audience would, for example, have easy access to the English melodrama and musical comedy. In addition, there was also an almost redundantly continuous Shakespearean repertoire, various contemporary plays from London theatres, performances of Italian opera, American Wild West plays, and there is even a record of a 1902 production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that featured “real negroes.” All were available to the discerning (or not so discerning) Irish man or woman in search of an evening's entertainment (*HIT*, 107). This availability offered “by any standards . . . a rich and varied diet – the theatrical equivalent of everything from American fast food to French *haute cuisine*” (*HIT*, 108). Hence, being Irish and in a theatre did not necessarily mean that one was uneducated or uninformed. It might, however, mean that one was unsatisfied. It was nearly inconceivable to lack a strong opinion regarding the future of Irish nationhood (regardless of whether one was overtly unionist or nationalist), yet going to the theatre meant leaving Irish Ireland behind. The particular political dynamics and inherent internal conflicts within the average Irish audience are well known to history.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Morash, *The History of Irish Theater* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 103; hereafter cited as *HIT*.

<sup>4</sup> The industrial revolution and the resulting economic prosperity in the manufacturing centers of the north facilitated an ideological split with the southern counties, a fissure that was already pronounced due to the fact that the southern counties were predominantly Catholic and the northern counties Protestant. The disastrous consequences of the potato famine which took its toll in far greater numbers in the south further

However, despite this environment teeming with dissent and rupture, what could and did unify the Irish audience into a single, dissatisfied body was the fact that what they *didn't* see (and what they wanted *to* see) was a representation of themselves on the stage.

Regardless of the differences in form the individual might imagine for this idealized unified, national self, one thing they could all agree upon was that it *wasn't* on the stage yet.

This kind of conflict between the needs of the audience and the offerings of the theatre couldn't last long in the volatile political climate of the time. Ironically, it was an English theatre producer, J.W. Whitbread, who was able to provide a temporary solution. He developed a resident touring company in 1884 that would make its home in the Queen's Theatre in Dublin, proclaiming itself to be the "Home of Irish Drama" (*HIT*, 109).<sup>5</sup> This company would open an Irish play at the Queen's for a number of weeks, and due to its Irish authors, Irish themes, and Irish audience, could almost guarantee for itself a constant streak of successes. Motivated by these triumphs, the company would then take its plays on tour around the country to various other Irish stages, and even internationally if finances permitted. Here, then, was the beginning of the identifiably

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increased the animosity between northern and southern Ireland. By the 1880s the notion of Home Rule, which would give Ireland its own parliament and total government independence from England, was a constant topic of heated debate and public riot. The Protestant majority in the north sought to remain part of the United Kingdom in order to continue to benefit from financially advantageous laws and political protection. The Catholic majority in the south sought independence in an effort to improve their financial situation and increase their political power. The issue was officially settled in 1922 when the southern counties were declared independent from England and became the Republic of Ireland. However, the treaty that established this result satisfied very few at the time, and dissatisfaction fueled political unrest late into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>5</sup> The Queen's Theatre in Dublin was originally located on Pearse Street. It first opened in 1829 as the Adelphi Theatre, but was demolished in 1844. It was rebuilt that same year and reopened as the Queen's. It was most famous in the 20th century as the home of various comic plays and musical reviews. The Abbey took over the building after the Abbey fire of 1951 and remained until 1966. The theatre closed in 1969 and was demolished in 1975.

Irish national stage. An audience could expect to see familiar Irish faces performing Irish-authored plays, and other familiar faces filling the seats to view those plays.

“While other Irish theatres of the period brought together a Wagnerite audience, or a minstrel show audience, or a musical comedy audience for a single night, the Queen’s was able to forge something like a community, where the theatre became a noisy, active place in which the audience worked with the performer in the creation of the play” (*HIT*, 110). A feeling of community based on being Irish and on being a theatrical audience began to form.

The audience experience at the Queen’s (and other popular theatres that developed in response to, and in mimicry of, it) was in direct contrast to the experience of the more traditional English theatre, where what the audience felt was their right to demand, and what the company felt was their right to decide on performing, were in constant conflict. Again, the result of this conflict between what was desired and what was offered was an educated, cosmopolitan audience that *before entering the theatre space* identified itself as, at least in this one dissatisfied respect, a unified Irish body. As Robert O’Driscoll writes in *Theatre and Nationalism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland*, “Like the Greeks and the Elizabethans, [Irish playwrights] were gifted with a sensitive dangerous audience, an audience reluctant to relinquish its grasp” on what was presented to them on the stage.<sup>6</sup> Once they entered the English or American theatres, though, they were asked to forget this unification and form a temporary bond as an audience without nation, willing to submit to, and absorb the products offered by, these multi-national

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<sup>6</sup> Robert O’Driscoll, “Introduction,” in *Theatre and Nationalism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland*, ed. Robert O’Driscoll (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1971), 9; hereafter cited as *TN*.

touring companies. In other words, they were asked to set aside their political interests where dramatic entertainment was offered. However, though “tradition had trained the people to listen . . . they had not yet lost the sense of individual importance essential to the evaluation of what they heard and saw.” In the new Irish theatres like the Queen’s, if “the artist presented on the stage a vision that shattered . . . attitudes and abstractions . . . the audience, acutely sensitive to the image of their country presented publicly, felt called upon to do battle for what it believed to be the honor of their nation” (*TN*, 10). It was this disjunction between what the audience members and the old theatre companies believed to be appropriate behavior, coupled with the new-found feeling of power stemming from the increase in theatrical experience made possible by the Queen’s, that caused the uproarious and significantly unique Irish response to late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Irish theatre.<sup>7</sup>

The specific details of what were to “accurately” and “pleasingly” comprise an Irish play (or an Irish national identity) were yet to be fleshed out. Preceding any journey to an individual performance, the Irish audience unified themselves around a national identity that was both palpably new, and not clearly defined. The Irish were simply the absence of English – in other words, Irish audiences were left to understand themselves as whatever was *not* what the English stage presented. As Declan Kiberd describes in his *Inventing Ireland*, Ireland was conceived to be “a sort of absence in

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<sup>7</sup> Even the stereotype of the “stage Irishman” has gone through different manifestations. The English version of the Irishman on stage was constantly drunk, comically stupid and often dangerously violent. Dion Boucicault, an Irish writer, adjusted this definition to include an individual who was often clever and charming. Irish writers have distanced themselves from and/or elaborated upon the concept ever since. For an interesting discussion of the “stage Irishman” in its early development see Elizabeth Cullingford, “National Identities in Performance: The Stage Englishman of Boucicault’s Irish Drama,” *Theatre Journal* 49.3 (Oct. 1997), 287-300.

English texts, a . . . ‘no place.’”<sup>8</sup> “Ireland” was commonly conceived to be, and thus was depicted as, “not England,” totalized as a nothing or opposite, just as the Scottish, Welsh, and northern Irish were erased and re-categorized as members of the United Kingdom, with their individual identities disappearing into England. What began to change at this particular point in history, however, is that the identification of themselves as *non-English* became a point of pride, rather than a mark of dysfunction and damage. In their own theatre the Irish began to feel empowered to take some control over what was presented to them, if only by making a verbal and emotional investment in the audience’s response. As O’Driscoll continues, “it is understandable that in a time of political, social, and artistic deprivation a nation should present on the stage life as it would want it to be rather than life as it was” (*TN*, 13). Yet at the same time, “in a moment of political revolution, people forget for a time their daily concerns” (*TN*, 15). The specifics of Irish identity as it was developed through the theatre had to replace the concept of non-English in both a practical or “realistic” sense, but also with a theoretical or philosophical significance. While the Queen’s and other popular theatres would choose the former, the Irish Literary Theatre, later to be known as the Abbey Theatre, would choose the latter.

Though the idea of an Irish nation independent from England had been desired for decades, if not centuries, the Queen’s became one of the most prominent public, group forums used to debate the nature of that new political identity. Christopher Fitz-Simon argues that “very few critics now recall that there already existed in Ireland a

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<sup>8</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 12; hereafter cited as *II*.

vibrant strand of vernacular theatre at the precise time when Yeats and his collaborators were drawing up their plan of action for what was to become the Abbey Theatre.”<sup>9</sup> This claim should not be taken to mean, however, that Yeats and his company were inconsequential or that previous research has overemphasized their effect on Irish theatre and identity. On the contrary, the Abbey Theatre, and especially W.B. Yeats, had a very specific message for Ireland – a message to which Ireland would carefully listen. It was the *method* of listening, though, the effort and the missteps in communication that Fitz-Simon analyzes, and his terming of the popular theatre as a strand of “vernacular” is important. Yeats rejected the vernacular theatre because he felt a rejection of dialects – and a consequent acceptance of his own definition of an Irish language of identity – communicated through the theatre – would be necessary if the dream of a unified Ireland were to be realized. In order to accomplish this new dramatic language, he expected his audience to reject their vernacular and adopt what he taught.

But viewing a play at the Queen’s did not, by any means, imply a passive reception of performed ideas (as being an audience member in an English playhouse, or later at the Abbey Theatre, probably did). Rather, as Joseph Holloway, a reviewer and avid diarist of the time, once said after viewing a play at the Queen’s:

At times, when the ‘bad character’ held the stage one could scarcely hear with the din made by the small boy element on the top. And for the cheering & hissing they seldom ceased for a moment. Now the hero said something that met with the entire approval of those in front, & even the informer had their say & the audience were up in arms against them – hissing, howling & wishing for their death with all their might & main of lung power. A genuine Queen’s audience (like today’s) to one not used to it must be a curious sight & a new experience indeed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland’s National Theatre – The First Hundred Years* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 10; hereafter cited as *INT*.

<sup>10</sup> Qtd. in *HIT*, 110. Joseph Holloway is often quoted by researchers investigating Irish drama during this historic period. Some of his work has been collected in *Joseph Holloway’s Abbey Theatre: A selection*



Though this kind of response seems to participate only emotionally in the production, rather than actually to have a hand in production decisions, one can recognize how the roots of an active voice (quite literally) were established in popular theatres like the Queen's. "Indeed, it was partly through the influence of Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn that *this* 'national Irish drama' became sidelined from the stage picture of the Ireland which [the Abbey company] was at pains to create" (*INT*, 10). What began as a populist theatre, a place that welcomed a willingness to talk back to the characters *represented* by the authors and players in an effort to exorcise the omnipresent ghost of English rule would later, famously, grow into a riotous response to the nature of representation and disciplined reception expected by the Abbey, a place that was both promised as, and perceived to be, Ireland's national stage.

During this last decade of the nineteenth century, though, what constituted appropriate Irish material, an appropriate audience response *and* appropriate definitions of the new Irish national identity were all innovative and unformed. This newness, coupled with the amorphous, shapelessly absent quality of the current national identity, required a great deal of pride and community support for its vitality and validity to be established, much less sustained. The audience's desire to be heard went hand in hand with a need to be seen – by other members of the audience, by the characters and playwrights responsible for the production, and by themselves – by identifying on some level with the characters on the stage. It was needs such as these that fueled this body of

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*from his unpublished journal, Impressions of a Dublin playgoer* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1967). However, this book is currently out of print.

individuals-as-single-body to desire both that identity and that pride reflected back to them in the theatre they viewed. After eight hundred years of colonization, tradition and history alone could not provide the necessary level of support for this emerging national identity. Cultural productions were designed to fill that void.

The Irish sought reflections of themselves in characters on the stage in order for their own evolving theory of self-as-nation (one cannot, without the aid of a mirror, view oneself as an independent and self-contained entity) to obtain credibility (for themselves, as well as in an international capacity).<sup>11</sup> Much like in a mirror, figures on stage are both separate from but similar to those in the position of viewing them. A proscenium stage is detached and separate from the individual who seeks the images the stage portrays, but also much like a mirror, the stage's physical proximity to the viewer is usually fairly small. One is in the same physical space with the reflection, therefore drawing a visceral connection between the two. This visceral connection is what weighs such importance on the received reflection. The blurring of the boundary between bodies and reflections allows for the identification of the body as a separate entity, but the reflection's connection to the reflected is what allows the perceiver to flesh out their sense of self. Due to the nature of English theatre in Ireland at the time, the Irish viewer was used to seeing (or at least hoping for) him/herself to be an entity separate from the caricature-

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage of identity development in babies can be considered analogous to this process of development in the Irish national identity. Whereas Lacan's theory deals with the development of a child's identity as separate and individual from the mother, my theory considers Ireland's detachment from the parental entity of England. This is not, by any means, to suggest that the process was the same for every Irish man and woman of the time, but rather that a theoretical connection can be drawn between Irish national identity and the theatre riots of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to explain why seemingly innocuous productions inspired such extreme responses.

like depiction of the stage Irishman.<sup>12</sup> If one wished to see him or herself reflected back by the performance of Irishness on the stage, one had to assume the identity of the alcoholic, ineffectual, usually effeminate and always comic servant or economically deprived day-laborer. If one didn't wish to assume *that* unappealing identity, one had to be English.

In the Irish national theatres, though, Irish audiences had the opportunity to demand something new – something that, though in opposition to the English identity, was not simply an absence of Englishness or an embodiment of what the English perceived to be a collection of the worst possible human qualities. The new Irish identity would take physical form, would be in opposition to the English, but would not be the English's opposite. The details of what that form might take, however, were yet to be decided because the process of forming an identity separate from that of a governing body requires a certain amount of misrecognition.

Jaques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage can provide a heuristic or model through which audience/performance relations might be understood in Irish theatre history. A child recognizing its reflection in a mirror understands that reflection *to be the child*, or the self itself, rather than a (fairly inaccurate because two-dimensional) representation of the self.<sup>13</sup> That same (necessary) misrecognition can be applied to the Irish theatre. The passionate riots in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century speak strongly to

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<sup>12</sup> For another critical definition of the "stage Irishman" see Kiberd's *II*. In general, he defines the stage Irishman as a depiction of a "feckless but cheerily reassuring servant," usually a comedically drunken but never threatening character (12).

<sup>13</sup> For a specific definition of "misrecognition" according to the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, see Jean LaPlanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1974).

how important Irish audiences felt it was to correctly present the on-stage reflection performed to them within the theatrical space. According to the Queen's and other theatres like it, "drama, by its nature, must appeal to the crowd, and a national drama would be expected to appeal to the nation."<sup>14</sup> At least in the initial stages of Irish independence and its intersection with Irish theatre, what was reflected was, at least in part, what *was*, and this conclusion was reinforced by the people's years of viewing English representations of what *wasn't*.

An important part of the identity-forming process, then, was negotiating whose responsibility it actually was to identify accurate representations. W.B. Yeats and what would eventually become the Abbey Theatre company had a conception of Ireland and what would comprise a national Irish theatre that differed greatly from that of the populist theatres such as the Queen's. Separating the need for a personal art from the more basic need for a personal or national identity, Yeats felt that "there can be no democracy in art," and he "realized that if he did not rule the multitude, the multitude would rule him" (*SAT*, 24). For Yeats and the Abbey theatre, a national art would do more than reflect back to the audience what, at that temporary point in history, the audience felt they were or wanted to be. Instead, a true national art would be a living and evolving thing – philosophically rather than physically mirroring its people. Yeats argued that "the theatre must be a place as sacred as a church, and those who attend it must come . . . to listen to a poet explain his vision" (*SAT*, 24). In other words, Yeats hoped that the mirroring effect would actually produce an identity in his audience. He

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1950), 24; hereafter cited as *SAT*.

believed that a mingling of artistic drive and political sensibility would best accomplish the heart of the goal of Irish independence – it would take Irish nationalism beyond the boundaries of Dublin Castle and into the collective psyche of the emerging nation. He wrote in *The Cutting of an Agate* that “a continual apology, whatever the cause, makes the mind barren because it kills intellectual innocence” and instead called for “the substitution of arguments and hesitations for the excitement of the first reading of great poets, which should be a sort of violent imaginative puberty.”<sup>15</sup> If in the theatre’s journey towards a national art it managed to accomplish political goals, so much the better – but the latter should never be sacrificed for the sake of the former.

The rejection of England as the figure of authority left a space that needed to be filled in order for new representations of Irish identity to attain a unified legitimacy. Benedict Anderson argues in his *Imagined Communities* that print culture was primarily responsible for groups of people first identifying themselves as members of a single national body, and for placing that body’s boundaries in opposition to other imagined communities.<sup>16</sup> In the case of Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, the community was already emphatically imagined *as* a community – it was only the specifics of the representation that were yet to be clearly defined. Instead of requiring print culture to facilitate the individual’s understanding of him/herself as a member of a greater whole, Irish identity at this time needed visual confirmation and validation that the identity they had already imagined existing was not only real, but

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<sup>15</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Cutting of an Agate* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 135.

<sup>16</sup> For a complete discussion of this theory, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1999).

appropriate. In addition, for the most part, both the colonized and the colonizer shared the same language and the same print culture. There was a meager attempt to revitalize Gaelic as a national language, but in large part economic demands and social stigma prevented this movement from achieving any marked success.

It was in this respect that Yeats and his company felt they could be the most useful – by offering the Irish audience a developed and developing culture around which they might unify, a space that was separate from England but not excluded from its history. Therefore, “the poet, as maker of images, provided a principal means whereby society attained Unity of Culture by enshrining in his art the myths and rituals of a race or nation, and by creating new images that were passed down to form that society’s inherited traditions.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than a group of people rejecting individualism in order to establish themselves as a community upon an uncontested form of communication (the written word as it is formed in a particular language), *or* a nation wholly excising an essential part of its development and history because it initially originated with the colonizers, this Irish body saw the introduction of the concept of community first, in all of its varied forms, and dealt with the struggle for the individual’s place within that community identity, second.

The result was the need for a medium through which participants could be both individuals and members of a group, with both sets of associated rituals and goals

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<sup>17</sup> James W. Flannery, *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), 61, hereafter cited as *YIT*.

reinforcing one another rather than combating one another.<sup>18</sup> Despite his belief to the contrary, though, just because Yeats willed something to be, did not make it so. The emerging Irish national audience was far from willing to immediately accept the new dictums set down by Yeats's church of Irish drama. Rather, the resulting struggle for control of national identity and the national theatre has become the stuff of legends – as well as the stuff of numerous critical works. The effort in this research is to add to that body of research by providing a new perspective – a perspective obtained by changing the critical focus.

A great deal of theoretical work has been done by such ubiquitous and prominent critics as Declan Kiberd and R.F. Foster, as well as new and innovative research by Vincent Cheng, Nicholas Grene, Christopher Morash and others with regards to examining the evolution of national Irish identity. There are countless books dedicated to an historical recounting of the politically disruptive events surrounding the performance of plays during the Abbey's youth, many of which will be referenced in the following chapters. This research hopes to develop ideas already well established by using these historical events and theories of identity to inform a detailed, close reading of some of the most notorious (or notoriously neglected) plays of that time. By using Anderson's theory as a bedrock (the idea that a nation, first and foremost forms around its print culture), and adding the political and historical events that Kiberd and Morash

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<sup>18</sup>Of course, if the Irish theatre was to be the church of new Irish nationalism and artistic spirit, then Yeats saw himself to be the high priest. He often said that a nation should be "like an audience in some great theatre" and quoted Hugo: "in the theatre the mob becomes a people" (*YIT*, 65-6).

argue resulted from the living presentations of that print culture, new insights into the post-colonial Irish mindset can be obtained.

A first step towards a common definition of Irish identity was the achievement of an Irish stage for Irish playwrights. However, the Queen's and theatres like it provided only the first of many steps necessary to accomplish a definition of nationhood at all palatable to the majority of the Irish people. By first examining the state of Irish theatre in the late nineteenth century, one can easily see why, if anything, the theatre and its intersection with national identity was of primary interest to a newly nationalist audience. At a time when differentiating themselves from England was as much a personal and political identity-act as attending a rally or casting a vote, the genuine lack of specificity in Irish representations on Irish stages did not go unnoticed. An early play like Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* walked the fine line between nationalist and unionist sentiments, in part by theatricalizing the cloak-and-dagger world of the "nationalist resistance...where a shadowy world of informers, hairsbreadth rescue attempts and underdog rebels existed parallel to the more mundane world of land reform politics and parliamentary elections" (*HIT*, 108).<sup>19</sup> Plays of this sort could straddle a politically tempestuous fence by making both sides of a diverse spectrum of attendees visualize the Home Rule issue, while at the same time making it impossibly romantic and distant. Nationalists could be pleased by supporting an alternative to the cliché stage-Irishman representation of the average Irish nationalist, while Unionists could take comfort in a

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<sup>19</sup> Boucicault's plays have been thoroughly analyzed by critics such as Elizabeth Cullingford (cited above) and are important background for an understanding of the Irish theatre before it considered itself to be a *national* Irish theatre. However, since these plays are not overtly political in their intent and they are largely representative of a nascent, transitional stage in Irish drama that precedes the interest of this research, they will not be addressed directly in this study.



production that was quite obviously that – a stage production of fictional characters existing in fictional conflict with one another. At the end of the performance, they could leave the theatre and the conflict behind.

It was the obfuscated dramatic purpose of melodrama that allowed for the casting of priority into the hands of the audience in plays like Boucicault's international successes and the Queen's Dublin popularity, and the extent of that success indicates how much the stage itself appealed to varied and cosmopolitan audiences as a group, as long as it offered that group room to differently interpret and identify with the various representations presented on the stage. This multiplicity, however, was complicated when the goal was to produce a *unified* depiction of nationhood. A Dubliner, for instance, was accustomed to buying a paper or magazine and having the solitary experience of reading it punctuated only by the similarly solitary debates exhibited in the material. Perhaps those political debates referred to the fate of a group, a religion, or a nation, but contesting voices were represented by single authors. At the theatre, however, groups of people engaged in a group activity. The audience member was not alone in ritual, in purpose, or (at least in accordance with the common perception) in interpretation. In other words, one might read to identify one's individual place within a group, but one attended the theatre to reaffirm one's group-relationship to the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup> As Nicholas Grene writes in *The Politics of Irish Drama*, "The images created

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<sup>20</sup> This is where my theory most overtly diverges from Anderson. Where Anderson deals with print culture and the "imagined communities" that evolved around them, my interest is in how a "real" community (and by real I mean as opposed to Anderson's use of the word "imagined") used the theatre to establish an officially recognized identity. Ireland sought to become a documented, ratified, internationally recognized nation with an independent government, as well as to possess the concurrent autonomous identity that would accompany such a government. Performance culture, as well as print

before a live audience are representation in action, the negotiation of meanings through the words of the playwright, the real bodies and voices of the actors, the *mise en scene* of director and designer, all operating within the field of the spectators' preconceptions and prejudices, likes and dislikes."<sup>21</sup> It is my effort, then, to read several representative plays carefully and explain the audience's reaction to them in order better to understand how they reciprocally affected the Irish's evolving sense of self *and* of nation.

This competing arena of attitudes and identity needs culminated in the climactic riots of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even if the audience erupted in riot, it was an all-Irish riot.<sup>22</sup> Theatres became the favorite location for both organized and decidedly *disorganized* protests for both ends of the religious and political spectrum. It was not unusual to see a brawl or two, or perhaps a full-fledged riot in the gallery of one of the performance houses, and frequently younger members of the crowd would arm themselves with oranges (if they were Unionist) or other types of missiles (if they were not). It was anyone's guess if their targets would be the actors on the stage or other political or religious groups within the audience. In the northern cities such as Belfast, where the shipyards offered the most work to the average audience member, rivets were the projectiles of choice, and injuries were common. Even the more peaceful audiences

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culture, was used to bring that about, and my focus will be on the effect performance culture had on that evolution.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 3; hereafter cited as *PID*.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, Morash recounts a number of anecdotes of British dignitaries attending the Irish theatre not to view the on-stage action, but instead to witness the disruptive behavior of the audience. Ireland had, quite literally, become its own Irish drama.

would at the least disrupt the performance, alternately singing unionist or nationalist songs in response to other audience members or characters on the stage.<sup>23</sup>

It was in this environment that W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martin began discussing a new theatre that might more adequately fulfill a nationalist agenda for a visual depiction of a unified Ireland. What immediately distinguished this new Irish Literary Theatre from other popular theatres at the time was its founders' elitism, their complete disdain for the expectations and desires of the theatre-going public. In fact, in a letter to Lady Gregory written near the turn of the century, Yeats says that the proposed theatre would be "a wild mystical thing...carefully arranged to be an insult to the regular theatre goer who is hated by both [himself and Lady Gregory]".<sup>24</sup> In other words, Yeats and company intended to turn away from the popular audience and return to a type of theatre independent of popular approval – one that hoped to survive on the patronage of what Morash describes as "enough knights and barons to keep a decent seventeenth-century theatre afloat, with no fewer than seventeen titled patrons...along with three Members of Parliament, the Provost of Trinity College, balanced on the other end of the political spectrum by the stentorian nationalist leader John O'Leary and members of the Irish Parliamentary Party" (*HIT*, 115). The Nationalist movement, as presented by the Irish Literary Theatre, would be a bi-partisan movement, but not a popular movement.

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<sup>23</sup> Morash and other Abbey Theatre historians (many of whom are cited below) refer to a variety of historical anecdotes recording this type of behavior.

<sup>24</sup> For this and other interesting letters exchanged by Yeats and Lady Gregory regarding the creation of the Irish Literary Theatre, see W.B. Yeats, *Correspondence*, ed. John Kelly (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

Though this illustrious list of supporters didn't necessarily provide the burgeoning theatre with unlimited financial resources, it did help to open up what was at the time a fairly closed theatre environment. Running a theatre in Dublin at the turn of the century was not only a politically serious business, it was one that could be substantially financially rewarding. As is often the case with politics, money was an issue. The three dominant theatres – The Theatre Royal,<sup>25</sup> The Gaiety,<sup>26</sup> and the Queen's – were not at all willing to simply give up what amounted to an entertainment monopoly. Licensing requirements at the time prohibited anyone from staging for "hire, gain, or any kind of rewards...any Interlude, Tragedy, Comedy, Prelude, Opera, Burletta, Play, Farce, [or] Pantomime" which, in effect, made a new theatre impossible (*HIT*, 116). It was this first hurdle, however, that initially drew Yeats's attention to (and showed him his talent for dealing with) the intricate connection between theatre and politics.

By allying himself with the head of the Amateur Dramatic Defense Association, solicitor Francis R. Wolfe, Yeats was able effectively to lobby MP Timothy Harrington to amend the existing laws (that were already considered to be seriously out of date) in

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<sup>25</sup> The Theatre Royal actually existed in four iterations, spanning just as many centuries. The first Theatre Royal opened in 1662 in Smock Alley, and was basically a political soap box for Dublin Castle. It was knocked down and rebuilt in 1735, and eventually closed in 1787. The Second Theatre Royal opened in 1820 on Hawkins Street under the name of the Albany New Theatre, but after a visit from George IV in 1821, it officially changed its name to the Theatre Royal. This second theatre was primarily a venue for English traveling productions, and burned to the ground in 1880. The Third Theatre Royal opened on 13 December 1897 at the same Hawkins Street location, and found itself to be in primary competition with the Gaiety Theatre for popular productions of musical comedy and melodrama. It was eventually turned into a cinema and officially closed its doors on 3 March 1934. Finally, the Fourth Theatre Royal opened in the same location in 1935 and primarily showed local actors and Irish plays. For financial reasons it closed its doors on 30 June 1962.

<sup>26</sup> The Gaiety opened on 27 November in 1871 at South King Street in Dublin, near St. Stephen's Green. Initially it promoted musical comedy and popular melodrama, but is open to this day and is recognized for its classic Victorian architecture and annual Christmas pantomime.

Yeats and this new theatre's favor. This first problem was eliminated by an amendment that allowed for the Lord Lieutenant to grant a license to a not-for-profit theatre which, in its pursuit of "science, literature or the fine arts" wished to put on a dramatic production. It also stipulated that the Lord Lieutenant could revoke the license at any time, and that any and all productions had to be personally approved by him. Therefore, the Irish Literary Theatre could produce plays in Dublin, but not for money or popular approval, or without the go-ahead from Dublin Castle.<sup>27</sup> And these were not the only favors the new theatre felt it must court. Edward Martyn, a founding member, refused to aid in the production of any plays not overtly approved by the Catholic Church. Copies of plays such as *The Countess Cathleen* were given to priests prior to any production date in order to gain the church's approval and Martyn's peace of mind. The new theatre's idealism, then, was beholden to the political and religious parties already firmly in power, as well as to the audience's needs and their own artistic interests.

What resulted for the theatre was a serious contradiction, or at least confusion, in both form and intent. In their statement of purpose, the Irish Literary Theatre asserted:

We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory... We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery or of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us. (Qtd. in *HIT*, 116)

Their prognostication of future dramatic offerings that were distinctly "Celtic and Irish" called out to a romantic Ireland that Yeats himself, in his poem "September 1913" would

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Colin Smythe, "The Countess Cathleen: A Note," *Yeats Annual* 3(1985), 193-197.

later admit was “dead and gone.” Critics such as Michael North have argued that “religion would not even bear mention as an element of a unified Irish culture if Yeats had not insisted so strongly on a kind of folk religion, on a body of myth and superstition antedating and, he hoped, post-dating Christianity.” He argues further that “Yeats created ambiguity in attempting to define a Celticism that is unified and yet not exclusive, pure even though it results from a mixture of races.”<sup>28</sup> It is debatable whether or not Yeats specifically, and the Abbey Theatre generally, had that much absolute power, but certainly their interaction with the political and artistic climate of the time highlighted key elements or “ambiguities” that had to be unraveled if the answer to the question of Irish identity was to be confronted, much less resolved.

Though the words in that original manifesto may have conjured political complications and ambiguities revolving around ideas of ethnic authenticity, the words also spoke of an optimistic primitivism that would turn Ireland away from its current political conflict to a theoretical time that the Irish believed existed before colonization had muddied its identity waters. At the same time, the manifesto and the theatre inadvertently recognized a fundamental problem with its plan. By claiming to satisfy a body “weary of misrepresentation,” i.e., the popular depiction of the “stage Irishman,” the Irish Literary Theatre quite intentionally implied that there was a proper representation, that it was easily distinguishable from what was currently being provided, and that their organization could rectify the discrepancy. Once such a discrepancy was removed, the new nation couldn’t help but be born. As Declan Kiberd

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<sup>28</sup> Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 31.

writes, “Yeats hoped that from his [new dramatic] style a full man might eventually be inferred and, in due course – such was the enormity of his ambition – a nation” (*II*, 117). The Irish Literary Theatre demanded an “uncorrupted and imaginative audience” who would somehow emerge despite the contaminated identity pool. Yet it would ask that same group of people to accept this new and wholly invented Irishness as authentic and original. As Kiberd goes on to point out, unlike national revolutions such as the American revolution, where national art came decades after official political independence, the ILT attempted to use its “national” art as a blueprint for national identity while, simultaneously, relying on its audience to embody characteristics invented by the art they were supposed to receive (*II*, 117). This new endeavor sought to turn the popular audience away from the “buffoonery” or “easy sentiment” that was currently quite *popular* by calling on an “ancient idealism” that was supposedly inherently present – but was in fact invented by the experience of the creation of the theatre, its reception by the audience, and the repercussions that resulted.

One of the first examples of the “misrepresentation” and the resulting development of national thought is *The Countess Cathleen*. As is discussed in Chapter II, in a complicated inversion of iconic Irishness, the infamous Famine is invoked as a setting. Rather than indict wealthy landowners, the Church or the British government, however, Yeats gave his fledgling audience a stage filled with tormented and haunted peasants, as well as a self-aggrandizing abstraction of an atheistic but heroic poet, and a valiant Protestant Countess willing for the welfare of her people to commit (and be supremely rewarded for) an act that by any religious standard is considered unforgivable.

Yet through this play Yeats intended to introduce his audience to a “non-representational art . . . a landscape of internal consciousness rather than . . . a despised external setting” (II, 118). And though the play was not popularly or critically well received, both author and audience learned that there was more to love than merely the land, and more to hate than simply the British. Most importantly, Yeats himself learned of the inherent complexity of the Irish mind and the necessary intricacy of representation such complexity demanded. His passionate revision of this play would remind him throughout his career that no “easy sentiment” would satisfy himself or his audience.

Only a few years later, the Irish Literary Theatre, now called the Abbey Theatre, would experiment with a style less dependent upon the artist’s personal motivations, and more on a combination of the needs of both theatre and audience. As is analyzed in Chapter III, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was, in both authorship and idealism, a critical, popular and enduring historical success. “In effect, the artist[s] volunteer[ed] to fill the cultural vacuum, as promissory note for a yet-to-be-implemented nation” (II, 119). Gregory and Yeats gave their theatre and their nation an icon for Ireland and of Irish femininity that promised both pride and pain – a creature who spoke of glory and independence, but also of the terrible price such rewards would cost. At the same time, though, the play presents the impossible lives of the politically minded Irish peasants, and the extent to which “the troubles” were personal, political and national. Even while the play presented an Irish icon beneath whom the nation could unify, it also demonstrated that individual Irish men and women were far from ideal or emblematic – rather, that they were simply human.



The further development of this humanness is discussed in Chapter IV, where J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* is considered. As the Irish nation and national identity evolved, the Abbey as national theatre evolved with it. So, then, did the representations of Irishness on the stage. In an effort to prove to Ireland that it no longer needed the safety net of the inviolate western peasant, Synge and the Abbey offered its audience a play that explored very human, very Irish, and very unpopular aspects of rural life and the peasant character. Instead of offering a Queen at center stage with subtly faceted peasants in the background, *Playboy* foregrounded the peasants, in all their various qualities and states of accomplishment and degradation, and kept Irish nationalism as only an ironic backdrop. As Kiberd writes, "the republican ideal was the achieved individual, the person with the courage to become his or her full self. . . what was proposed here was . . . a self so possessed that it could withstand the pressure of proffered, inappropriate forms" (II, 119-20). As a result, despite the growing pains associated with the acceptance of its full self, Ireland would eventually recognize that even *Ireland* deserved the right to be less than perfect some of the time.

Finally, once independence had been earned and a period of comparative calm descended upon Ireland, the Abbey was able to distance itself from its efforts to define nationhood and support political independence. Chapter V and its analysis of Lennox Robinson explores how this distancing did not mean that the theatre no longer had an interest in expressing Ireland and Irish national identity, but rather that its politics could share the stage with other artistic endeavors. As a whole, the theatre and its artists could move beyond the conquest of Ireland by England and its subsequent rebellion, to an

exploration of what Ireland *wanted* now that it had its opportunity to decide for itself. The result was a period of nostalgic dramas that might on the surface seem benign and derivative, but through which such writers as Robinson reinforced the difficult work done by those who had come before him. In comedies such as *The Whiteheaded Boy* and dramas such as *The Big House*, Robinson kept the post-revolutionary audience aware of the constantly evolving state of its nation, its right to be entertained and distracted from its daily life, but also of the issues that continued to plague it.

In summary, this research hopes to examine key plays that marked essential moments in the evolution of Irish theatre and its intersection with Irish national identity. A play from just before the Abbey's formal creation, one from its first set of performances, one from the high point of its political fervor and two from its post-revolutionary period have been selected because they illustrate concepts that in pieces have been discussed by different bodies of research, but together have not been analyzed. The author(s) had a substantial role in what the audience was presented on stage. The audience also, through financial but also violent political action, spoke back to the artists and performers. Critics discussed the different works at length, often fueling and sometimes inspiring the audience's reaction to plays not yet performed. Finally, the texts themselves, often ignored in analyses of stage dramas, offer clues as to why individuals acted, and how a nation developed. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wrote in *Kafka*:

Because collective national consciousness is often inactive in external life and always in the process of breakdown, literature finds itself charged with the role of collective

enunciation. Especially if a writer is on the margins, this allows him all the more scope to explore the community consciousness.<sup>29</sup>

It is this collective enunciation and the resulting community consciousness that this research hopes to explore further.

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<sup>29</sup> Giles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 17.

## CHAPTER II

### YEATS'S ROMANCE WITH *THE COUNTESS CATHLEEN*

As the Irish National Theatre began to gain support, the demand for a “true” Irish drama to fill the stage grew more pressing, and of substantially greater interest to Irish artists, journalists and politicians. What constituted “true” Irish drama, what fundamentally was meant by “authentic” Irishness, was a constant subject of debate in the newspapers and discussion clubs popular at the time. Up to this point, the “stage Irishman” had populated both Irish and English stages, reducing the Irish people to drunken buffoons – the mere comic relief within the serious drama depicting the lives of the legitimate English people. The stage Irishman was sotted, weak, and corrupt, but was also often feminized – depicted as fragile and in need of the masculine protection of the English government. This feminization of Ireland was used by English propagandists to marginalize the Irish people, marking them as docile and controllable. As a response to this stereotyping, Yeats developed a female mythological leader as a convenient method by which such stereotypes might be countermanded.<sup>30</sup> *The Countess Cathleen* was Yeats's first attempt at dramatizing that female leader, an icon he'd later revise in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. *The Countess Cathleen* and her heroine would trouble Yeats throughout his career, forcing him to return to the play numerous times to

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the use of female figures as physical or symbolic embodiments of Ireland, see Encarnacion Hidlago Tenorio, “From Countess Cathleen to Nora Clitheroe: An Exploration into Ireland's Women,” *British and American Studies* 6 (2000), 22-30; hereafter cited as *FCC*. Also, Brian O'Rourke, “The Long Walk of a Queen: The Representation of Ireland as a Woman in the Irish Literary Tradition, II,” *Chiba Review* 7 (1985), 1-49, and Lorna Reynolds, *Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1983).

reconsider the language and the plot, and as well as if such an amalgamation of disparate characteristics was even possible. Despite the fact that their response would prove the audience not quite ready for this type of portrayal, this first attempt introduced the Irish theatre to the idea that a woman could be pious, powerful *and* Irish, and that religion could be flexible enough to accommodate all the different political viewpoints that together make up Ireland.

Encarnacion Hidalgo Tenorio has argued that women have often been used to represent a nation's better qualities. Gendering Ireland as female, however, underscores some difficult contradictions. The "Motherland" is almost universally iconic of that which must be protected, but also that which protects – home is where one goes to be safe, which is exactly why it deserves a blood sacrifice, a mortal risk, in order to sustain its inviolate nature.<sup>31</sup> Tenorio explains that women's perceived "virginity" "pure minds" and "strength" have all been considered equivalent to that of the nation to which they belong (*FCC*, 22).<sup>32</sup> The list Tenorio offers is interesting, especially in the situation of the emerging Irish nation. "Virginity" or a "pure mind" can both be positive qualities mutated into sinister methods of control when applied to a tyrannical regime seeking to crush dissident voices that might question its political power. However, Tenorio also mentions "strength," and not *only* the strength that comes from enduring hardships or

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, discussed in Chapter III, which epitomizes this need for a blood sacrifice.

<sup>32</sup> Though Tenorio is not a feminist critic *per se*, his identification of the complicated and often conflicting nature of the definition of femininity in colonized countries serves as one touchstone for the analysis of this play. Though his language tends to indicate a totalizing perception of women and of constructions of womanhood, this may be the result of the work being translated from Spanish to English. For the purpose of this study, it is assumed that the definitions of femininity *are* constructs and therefore sensitive to time, place, and other issues of context.

martyring oneself for a cause. Instead, he argues that “a woman in Celtic tradition could play several roles; she could be a queen, she could be a warrior, she could be a magician, and she could also be a loving wife” (*FCC*, 22). When Yeats, wittingly or unwittingly, gave life to the Countess Cathleen, he attempted, by uniting conflicting and contradictory qualities, to supplant the stage *Irishman* with a new icon: that of a strong, decisive, protective Irish woman.

### **A Love Affair with the Queen**

As has been stated earlier, the goal of the Irish National Theatre, later to find its home at the Abbey Theatre, was to teach the Irish people a new way of understanding themselves as Irish – to redefine Irish nationality so that the new Irish nation could be properly built. “But politicians and playwrights knew how important it was to find, to create, to uncover or, even, to fabricate their genuine Irish nation,” and individuals such as Yeats, Gregory, Moore and later Gonne, Synge, Robinson and others were quick to provide their interpretations of national necessity (*FCC*, 22). The riots that would eventually stem from their productions, however, forced them to face a difficult truth. Despite their desire and noble intent, their theatre could not be a school, nor could their stage function as a disciplinary mirror. Even that drama which overtly claimed to reproduce the “real” could only present idealized representations. Only fractions of what the audience would believe were reflections of their individual definitions of Irishness.

A new icon would have to supplant the “stage Irishman.” The falsity of *that* well-entrenched and objectionable depiction was easy to identify. He was “a drunkard, a simpleton and an irreverent, monstrous and derisive character,” and at least up to this

point in history, he was always depicted in the same way – offering the same type of cruel humor to any play in which he appeared (*FCC*, 22). This Irish caricature was easy to discount because it grouped all of Ireland into one wholly unflattering category. However, the new Irish heroine, in that she was both female and Irish, would have to be far more faceted and have a far greater level of complexity in order adequately to supplant her predecessor while still unifying a diverse Irish populace. There was one quality everyone could agree upon – she would have to be untainted, by every definition that the ever-expanding Irish audience could imagine. The stage Irishman was wholly bad: at his worst he was a criminal and at his best he was a fool. Yeats's *Countess*, if she was to satisfy the nation he hoped she'd represent, would have to combat that negativity with a superiority so all-encompassing that it could undo the damage such an entrenched symbol had caused. Yet definitions of femininity, definitions of *proper* femininity, especially in a nation as religious as Ireland, were bound to conflict. Therefore, what would constitute Irish femininity, to Yeats and to the nation, would be a question to which Yeats would return throughout his career.<sup>33</sup>

For Yeats, such a character had to be both representative and realistic – she had to *feel* Irish, but she had to be beyond anything worldly and corruptible. Tenorio argues that Irish women “had to function both as the family support and as the nation's spiritual bastion.” As a result, “the Irish woman was expected to be symbolic of political independence . . . [and as a result] she was disassociated from its actual realization”

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<sup>33</sup> According to Marcia Peoples Halio, Yeats “revised [the play] officially five times, and many other times unofficially. He mentions it in his prolific published correspondence more often than any of his other works, and he refers to it in some of his best known later poems, written in the 1930s.” in “Proud Lady: Yeats's *Countess Cathleen*,” *The Journal of Irish Literature* 20:1 (Jan. 1991), 9; hereafter cited as *PL*.

(*FCC*, 23). In other words, in order to retain those untainted qualities that could universalize her as a Queen in the minds of the Irish people, she had to be exiled from the public life that might tempt her into falling from her exalted status.<sup>34</sup> She was denied exactly those freedoms for which she fought. This contradiction became especially obvious when it came to the stage – the theatre was supposed to house the new church of Irish nationalism, but at the same time, actors and actresses were considered morally questionable. Even Maud Gonne, always an avid and active public speaker, was at first reluctant to act because she was afraid it would impair her credibility with the Irish people.<sup>35</sup> Women were barred from most politically activist groups (the Gaelic league one exception), and yet the Irish stage promised a new Irish icon – and after meeting Maud Gonne, Yeats’s personal embodiment of the ideal Irish woman, that new icon was destined to be female. To Yeats, Gonne “symbolized all that was lofty, patriotic and imaginative” (*PL*, 10). He had found his muse – all that remained was to create the work that would speak her message and find an audience prepared to receive it.

Maud Gonne’s importance to both Yeats and Ireland as a political and dramatic muse is exemplified by her being cast in the role of the Countess. It is easy to see, then, why writing a play that intended to produce a national icon (and at the same time capture the magic Yeats felt Maud Gonne personified) was such a substantial task – a task that

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<sup>34</sup> It is important to recognize that the distinction here *is* drawn along gender lines. Depictions of masculinity were not held to the same status of purity. Women’s association with “Mother Ireland” demanded that they be living embodiments of everything the Irish wished their country to represent. A man’s job in that national drama was to die for the pure and inviolate land – his purity was proven by his death, and not by the way he lived his life.

<sup>35</sup> She discusses this dilemma in her autobiography entitled *A Servant of the Queen: Her Own Story* (Dublin: Golden Eagle, 1950), 168-9.



would keep Yeats occupied, intermittently, for over 20 years.<sup>36</sup> Pushed into a creative fervor by his relationship with Maud Gonne, Yeats began rewriting *The Countess Cathleen* from its prose version into a play in 1899. According to R.F. Foster, he had long desired to write a play that utilized the rich peasant folk tales Lady Gregory was collecting, and originally had settled on the story of the Countess Kathleen O'Shea, who "sold her soul to save the country people in the west of Ireland from starving." Yeats was inspired by "those electrically charged weeks following his first meeting with Gonne."<sup>37</sup> Ellmann describes the initial meeting of the two as being one of mutual artistic and political agreement, rather than simply one of young romance:

Neither of the young nationalists knew at the time, he being twenty-three and she twenty-two, what kind of project was possible, but both wanted to do something for their country. Yeats thought at first, when she confided to him her interest in the theatre, that he would satisfy his nationalist ambitions and hers by a series of dramas on Irish subjects which she would act on the Dublin stage. He had long intended to write a play on the Countess Kathleen O'Shea, subject of a west of Ireland folk tale. But Maud Gonne's flamboyant spirit was not to be put down so quietly; she was looking, he wrote long afterwards, for some heroic action to consecrate her youth.<sup>38</sup>

The analogy is an obvious one: according to all accounts, the depth of Yeats's infatuation with Gonne was matched only by his sense of insecurity. A story, then, that would appeal to her revolutionary inclinations as well as his self-abasing sense of

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<sup>36</sup> In various forms, *The Countess Cathleen* (spelt with a "K" in its first incarnation) appeared first in 1892. Principal revisions are in *Poems* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895); *Poems*, 1899; *Poems*, 1901; *The Poetical Works of W.B. Yeats in Two Volumes*, vol. 2, *Dramatical Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1907); and *The Countess Cathleen* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912). All versions can be found in *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966). Since the story appears in both prose and dramatic form, I've chosen the 1899 stage version for analysis here. I feel that it best elucidates the problems with dramatic representations of Irish identity and Irish femininity in the emerging Irish Literary Theatre, as well as an interesting personal conflict in Yeats's romantic and artistic life.

<sup>37</sup> R.F. Foster's *W.B. Yeats: A Life. Vol. 1 – The Apprentice Mage* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 97; hereafter cited as *YL*.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: Norton, 1979), 105; hereafter cited as *MM*.

romanticism was clearly in order. He would use the play to woo his love, and if he couldn't capture her romantically, he would capture her fictionally.

Yet Yeats's passion for Gonne is important for reasons beyond its romantically captivating nature. It epitomizes the problem of creating a female national icon that must also be "untainted." The Countess, if she were to truly embody Ireland for all of Ireland's people, had to simultaneously satisfy very disparate desires: she had to concurrently embody the mother, the lover, and the virginal goddess for the entire collective Irish imagination. Similarly, despite Yeats's decades-long unrequited love for Maud Gonne, their romance, for the most part, was unconsummated. Gonne repeatedly refused his proposals of marriage, giving as her only excuse that she was better for him as a muse, rather than as a lover.<sup>39</sup> Neither Yeats nor Gonne could conceive of a way that she could be both. Additionally, the artist had very specific ideas about what kind of play and what kind of character he would produce in order to do justice to his beloved. "While Yeats felt that a national literature was important . . . he [also] felt that literature must be genuine, not politically motivated" (*PL*, 10). Thus Yeats was destined to create for himself and his people something he felt was genuine, yet at the same time, something very personal. As David Clark writes, "he sought 'unity of being' and this search was complicated by the division of his loyalties among art, patriotism, love and religion."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Both the Foster and Ellmann biographies make mention of this. Yeats also refers to the incident in his autobiography. See *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

<sup>40</sup> David R. Clark, "Vision and Revision: Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*," *The World of W. B. Yeats: Essays in Perspective* (Victoria, B.C.: Unvie, 1965), 158; hereafter cited as VR.

## Courting Insurrection

*The Countess Kathleen* was first published in 1892 in prose form, and received mixed reviews. Prior to its publication, however, Yeats read the story to Gonne as an accompaniment to his proposal of marriage. There is critical dispute with regards to how her refusal affected the revisions of the work between the 1892 prose and the 1899 dramatic versions, but Yeats is quoted as saying “he had come to interpret the life of a woman who sells her soul as a symbol of all souls that lose their peace, their fineness in politics, serving but change.”<sup>41</sup> Certainly Yeats felt that he had lost Gonne to her political fervor, but it was that fervor that in part fueled his own passion, and his mythology of Irish womanhood. His sacrifice would not be in blood, but would be in ink, telling the nation the story of an artist doomed to love and lose, and a pure heart fated to die for the love of her country.

Yeats tried to wage this artistic and philosophical battle at the same time he was facing a very personal identity and power struggle in his romantic life. Gonne had rejected his proposal of marriage at the time production began on the 1899 version of *Countess*, and the two had also recently returned from a (for Yeats) frustrating and (for both) emotionally taxing visit to Paris. His mixed feelings towards his muse are illustrated by the fact that only certain editions of the published *Countess* are dedicated to Gonne. Others, including the copy found in Gregory’s library, omit the dedication and instead show only blank pages.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Harold Orel, *The Development of William Butler Yeats: 1885-1900* (Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1968), 87.

<sup>42</sup> Colin Smythe, “*The Countess Cathleen*: A Note,” *Yeats Annual* 3(1985), 193; hereafter cited as CCN.

The result of this emotional turmoil was that when Yeats could not court Gonne, he courted controversy. As Aleel's music fails to distract Cathleen from her martyrdom, his play failed to divert Gonne from her political activism (an activism Yeats blamed for keeping him and his beloved apart). In response, Yeats directed his energies toward satisfying his own nationalist inclinations. He designed his play not merely to entertain or to satisfy a paying audience. Rather, he created an opportunity to teach – to use his art to instruct the Irish audience on what the new national icons, and the new national art, would and should be. Hugh Kenner writes that “Yeats knew (in those first years) little of stagecraft, [and] did not wish to pack houses.”<sup>43</sup> His efforts were directed towards creating legend rather than commercial success. The original versions of the play were subtitled “A Miracle Play” and if he couldn't give himself his own romantic miracle, he would offer a new type of miracle to the Irish people – one that would allow for the nation to rebel against England as a unified homeland, rather than as a fractured and partisan collection of individuals. Michael Sidnell writes that “in the earlier versions especially . . . there is a certain bravura in having pagan gods and Christian angels consort together on the page or stage of a miracle play.”<sup>44</sup> Yeats was eager to move his country beyond a provincial religiosity more inclined to censure rather than to coalesce. His heroine would supersede religious distinctions and common standards, and though he hadn't perfected his creation yet, his desire for her acceptance, and the

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<sup>43</sup> Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1983), 30.

<sup>44</sup> Michael J. Sidnell, “The Countess Cathleen as a Study in Theatrical Genre,” *South Carolina Review* 32:1 (Fall 1999), 38; hereafter cited as CCS.

acceptance for the venue by which she'd be communicated to the audience, was essential for a national unification of identity.

As a means of imparting a new morality through this innovative type of drama, he looked to the western peasant folk tales. Thus there were reasons for Yeats's interest in the Irish folk heroine first shown to him by Lady Gregory beyond the Countess's idealized similarity to Maud Gonne. In his introduction to *Irish Folk and Fairy Tales* Yeats writes that folk tales are "full of simplicity and musical occurrences, for they are the literature of a class for whom every incident in the old rut of birth, love, pain and death has cropped up unchanged for centuries: who have steeped everything in the heart: to whom everything is a symbol" (Qtd. in *PL*, 9). Sidnell writes that at this time "his main intention was to divert the energies of [his colleagues] from realist, prose drama into an alternative, mainly verse mode" (*CCS*, 38). For Yeats, the new Irish drama would be verse drama, and as an already successful poet, it is easy to see why his ear would be drawn to the "musical occurrences" of verse. Verse drama was markedly different from current English and Ibsenesque "realist" drama and would satisfy Yeats's desire for an *avant garde* Irish art scene. At the same time, speaking in blank verse epitomized the classic style of Shakespearean and ancient Greek drama. As Halio writes, "he was striving for simplicity, trying to rid his verse of elaborate Victorian diction and phraseology," opting instead for the iambic pentameter of blank verse which most closely mimicked "the natural rhythms and structure of speech" (*PL*, 11). He would use the high art of the colonizers against them in a way that would unify Anglo-Irish ancestry and western peasant iconography.

The prevalence of symbols, what Yeats described as a tradition where “everything was a symbol,” also offered a fertile ground in which the artist might plant his nationalist seeds. He refused to be constrained by conventional wisdom, conventional education, or conventional religion and insisted that folk tales superseded convention. For Yeats, they existed outside of history and also, to some extent, out of the repressive grasp of religion. In his 1888 collection of folk tales he “asserts that the Irish peasants, because of their distance from the centers of the Industrial Revolution, have preserved a *rapport* with the spiritual world and its fairy denizens which has elsewhere disappeared” (*MM*, 119, emphasis his). His idealized version of the western Irish peasant,<sup>45</sup> and more importantly of the folk tales they disseminated through their oral culture, kept them on the margins of modern society and the influence of the Catholic Church. Though the church was an essential part of peasant life, so were the banshee, the faeries and the pookas of the forest. And whether those mythical characters were considered symbolic representations of repressed emotions or physical beings with the ability to affect human lives, the peasant people, at least in Yeats’s mind, had managed to escape the all-encompassing Englishness of the eastern urban areas.

In the decade between the first draft of the play and the original stage production, Yeats had set his creative heart on “the recovery of the lost arts of rhythmical speech and

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<sup>45</sup> And this is quite literally a wholly idealized version. Yeats relied entirely on Lady Gregory for mitigated exposure to the Irish western peasant. The peasants described in Yeats’s poetry, prose and drama should be considered to be almost entirely a product of his imagination and would have born little relation to any historically verifiable experience. “Reality” for Yeats would have been incidental. His interest in the peasant was only as a symbol.

speaking or chanting to musical notes.”<sup>46</sup> Yet he had also set his heart on winning Maud Gonne’s hand in marriage. As a result, Yeats’s mind would always be torn between his private affections and his public persona, and in 1899 both were being thoroughly abused. Gonne had refused his proposal for a second time, as well as his offer of the lead in *The Countess Cathleen*. And despite the fact that the play had appeared in print, prose form several times, as he began to organize the stage production, the play began taking public abuse for supposed public displays of “blasphemous content” (*CCR*, 24). In a letter to George Coffey, written on February 14<sup>th</sup> of 1889, he said the play would be “human enough to rouse people’s sympathies [and] fantastic enough to wake them from their conventional standards” (*CCR*, 24). However, as will be described below, as the play began production, resistance began to form.

By 1899, Yeats had matured both personally and artistically. He had had his first sexual relationship with Olivia Shakespear, he had published several collections of poems and prose works, and he had learned a great deal about mastering the public spectacle.<sup>47</sup> By 1899 he was heavily involved in the organization of the new Irish Literary Theatre and had earmarked *The Countess Cathleen* to be one of the first plays performed. How much of his affection for the play came from the woman whom he now understood to be his unattainable muse, and how much came from his affection for his first real piece of stage art is debatable. The conflict, though, was not something from which Yeats shied. Rather, he courted the storm of debate he knew the play would

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<sup>46</sup> Ronald Schuchard, “*The Countess Cathleen* and the Revival of the Bardic Arts,” *South Carolina Review* 32:1 (Fall 1999), 24; hereafter cited as *CCR*.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed description of Yeats’s ability to manipulate the press in order to create controversy – and thus sales for his work, see *YL*, cited above.

cause. At the time, Edward Martyn was the primary financial supporter of the fledgling theatre, and he was also a devout Catholic. He was suspicious of Yeats's known affinity for the occult, and several times threatened to withdraw his support of the production. Martyn was certainly not alone in his suspicions regarding Yeats's interest in the arcane, and there were several well-publicized debates about the play on the grounds that Yeats was a known pagan (*CCR*, 24). In addition, Florence Farr had been retained as the stage manager because Yeats felt she had a firm understanding of the type of acting a verse play would require. However, when George Moore visited the rehearsals he quickly had her fired, and replaced lead actress Dorothy Paget with an English actress, May Whitty (*CCR*, 25). If Yeats was to have his controversial play produced, he had to submit to these fundamental changes.

In addition, Frank Hugh O'Donnell, a long term political adversary of Yeats (stemming from O'Donnell's expulsion by Parnell from the Irish Party), published a pamphlet entitled *Souls for Gold* which attacked the play for two specific scenes. The first is the opening scene where a peasant, driven mad by hunger, kicks over his wife's shrine to the Virgin Mary.<sup>48</sup> The second is where "the Demon, disguised as an Irish pig, hunts down and slays 'Father John the Priest' while reading his breviary, and sticks his soul into his black bag."<sup>49</sup> This pamphlet served to rally many politically-minded

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<sup>48</sup> Austin Clarke, in his article entitled "The Cardinal and the Countess" makes a convincing argument that this scene actually depicted *not* an intentionally heretical act by a starving peasant, but rather an image of a man literally possessed by the devil. He writes that "no doubt this opening could have been dramatically effective if the young poet had not tried to combine shock tactics with the subtlety with which he had learned from the Belgian dramatist, Maeterlinck, who employed symbolic signs in his experimental plays." in *Ariel* 3:3 (1972), 58.

<sup>49</sup> Qtd. from the original pamphlet in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Irish Literary Theatre: 1899-1901* (Dublin: The Dolmen P, 1975); hereafter cited as *ILT*.



Catholics, and even caused Cardinal Logue to ban the play without reading it (*PL*, 12).

It is understandable why a Catholic peasantry, beleaguered by years of financial, political and artistic repression, might not search for a deeper meaning behind the images they saw on stage. Despite the fact that Mary is able to resist temptation and dies quietly as a result, her husband and son not only fail to follow her example, but gleefully run about the countryside helping to spread the word of the demons' bargain. Moreover, different souls are worth different amounts, and despite the fact that she willingly gives hers up to the Devil, the Protestant Cathleen's soul draws a sum large enough to pay for the entire parish.

Protestants, too, objected to the play on religious grounds. Cathleen is the epitome of feminine piety, yet she makes an almost immediate decision to sell her soul in exchange for her people. Her sacrifice was selfless, but still implied a willingness to reject her spiritual ideals for bodily needs. Also, the demons that save the starving peasants in exchange for their souls could easily be misconstrued; their bargain parallels Protestant proselytizers during the Famine offering soup only to those who would convert from Catholicism to the Protestant church. One of the demon's first acts in the play is to "convert" Shemus and his son Teigue, giving them money not only for their souls, but for their willingness to talk their neighbors and friends into the same bargain. Beyond even that, the idea that the Countess would be forgiven her sin because it was selfless in nature was theologically debatable. A Protestant belief that God would actually forgive her act because it was well intended was not supported by any respected religious text, and ultimately it reinforced the idea that Cathleen's soul was somehow

worth more than those of her people. God sent down angels to wrest it back from the Devil, but he let the peasants choose between pious starvation and eternal damnation. Ultimately, Yeats could have anticipated that the inclusion of these elements would court the controversy that consistently followed the play, but rather than attempt to neutralize these inflammatory instances, he fought for their inclusion.

### **The Play's the Thing**

Yeats was eager to confront the nation's differences and hoped to defuse them in what he perceived to be a safe space – the stage. He also hoped his play would offer a national icon to supplant the buffoonish stage Irishman *and* act as a vehicle by which he could woo Maud Gonne. Despite the extremely difficult task Yeats set out for himself, the unification of “art, patriotism, love and religion” in a form that would satisfy the desires of a multi-faceted Irish populace, the play's plot is relatively simple. However, upon careful examination it can be seen to be saturated with complicated political and religious figures that challenge the notions of Irish identity as often as they seek to represent them. These characters and the decisions they make forced the Irish audience to confront the question of what icons they would consider representative of their nation, and how far they were willing to fictionalize the national mirror they would need to bravely face, if they were to achieve independence.

Yeats's aim in writing this play was to offer a new morality for the nation, one that would replace the religious repression that continued to divide the Irish people. Beyond mere representation, Yeats's drama investigates the flexibility of concepts of good and evil, of what constitutes a moral act, and what demarcates a selfish or a selfless

act of love by incorporating mythical characters from the fairy or folk tales of the peasants.<sup>50</sup> According to Clark, the play illustrates “the convergence of Christianity and the old nature faith . . . to show the struggle of two universal ways of life – a spiritual and a materialistic – for control of a particular place – Ireland” (VR, 160). The play does not simply draw upon the fictionalized history of the western peasant – it asks the modern Irish audience to accept an amalgamation of beliefs that would connect east with west, and new with old. As Peter Allt argues, at the time “modern nationalism tend[ed] to become a ‘religion’ in this respect: it [was] prone to assert a transcendent or superhuman value; to identify this value with the being of the *nation*; and to exact on behalf of this value a sort of aggressive, heroic activity, with the subordination of every alternative moral or natural good.”<sup>51</sup>

The play opens with a peasant home that is suffering from the effects of the famine. Three peasant characters, Shemus Rua, Mary, his wife, and Teigue, his son, are starving. Their problems, though, are both physical and spiritual. In his first line Teigue says “they say that now the land is famine-struck/The graves are walking.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the evil that affects the people in this fictional peasant town (Yeats describes the location only as “in Ireland and in old times”) is both nature and something decidedly *unnatural*. Anthony Bradley has argued that “the famine in the play symbolizes the

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<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the Irish conception of the fairy and its relevance to *The Countess Cathleen* see Peter Alderson Smith, “*The Countess Cathleen* and the Otherworld,” *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 17:2 (Summer 1982), 141.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Allt, “Yeats, Religion and History,” *Sewanee Review* 60 (Autumn 1952), 624. Emphasis his. It is important to recognize that though Allt’s interest is in “modern nationalism” in general, with Yeats as a focal point, my interest throughout this research is modern nationalism strictly in the Irish context.

<sup>52</sup> W.B. Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen* in *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: The Plays*, vol. 2, eds. David R. Clark & Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Scribner, 2001) 27. All further references to this play will be abbreviated as CC.

spiritual deprivation of modern Ireland and the materialism which seemed to Yeats to have infected so much of Irish society.”<sup>53</sup> Whether the famine is inflicted by a morally corrupt populace obsessed with materialism, or a callous God who has turned away from his people, it is clear that the problems the people face go beyond mere agricultural failure. It is also obvious from the strange behavior of the characters that a successful crop or relief efforts from a neighboring nation would not be enough to quell these devastating problems. Teigue goes on to say that “that is not the worst; at Tubber-  
vanach/A woman met a man with ears spread out,/And they moved up and down like a bat’s wing” (CC, 28). Actual demons have invaded this area, and pious or not, the starving peasants are easy prey.

The devils are symbolic as well as literal. The peasants face a crisis of spirituality represented by the invading devils who have come to buy their souls, but another devil, described by Teigue as “a man who had no mouth,/Nor eyes, nor ears; his face a wall of flesh” illustrates another element to the evil presence within the play (CC, 28).<sup>54</sup> The fiends described are the walking dead, men with bat ears or in some cases without any faces at all – literally, they are the defaced humanity caused by the blight. The emotional crisis caused by the utter starvation of the people has debased them to the point of being less than human and changed them into faceless, lifeless demons. Indeed, it is unclear whether “they may have been called into the land by its condition as if the

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<sup>53</sup> Anthony Bradley, *W.B. Yeats* (New York: Unger, 1979), 71; hereafter cited as *WBY*.

<sup>54</sup> This character also represents a character that refuses input from the material world, a being that won’t see or hear the conditions around him. Instead of learning to adapt, he puts up a wall of “flesh” or a dedication to “natural heritage” which keeps him solitary in a world of his own creation, and doomed to never fully inhabit the world in which he physically exists. He also can’t speak. His isolation prevents him from having any effect on the world, except in his own mind. Communication is impossible because of his isolation.

famine were a moral or spiritual condition of blindness or materialism,” or if these are merely the deformed and debased peasants themselves, ruined by the excruciating poverty and deprivation they have been forced to endure.<sup>55</sup> Yet the solution to the problem is clearly not religious. Mary remains pious and avidly prays to her shrine of the Virgin Mary. She chastises her son who asks “What’s the good of praying?” and cautions him that his blasphemies will only bring misfortune – but the misfortune is already there (CC, 28). What they need is not protection, but salvation.

Salvation seems an impossibility, though, especially once Shemus returns home after having tried to beg for alms to feed his family. He is unsuccessful because the other beggars chase him away in order to enhance their own chances of receiving money. The people are forced to turn upon each other in this time of crisis, and though Mary believes that “God . . . to this hour has found bit and sup” and “will cater for us still,” Shemus bitterly reminds her that the family can’t eat her religion (CC, 29). It is at this moment that Yeats introduces his heroine, the Countess, and her entourage: Oona, Cathleen’s guardian, and Aleel, Cathleen’s lover.<sup>56</sup> Shemus is quick to curse the trio for playing music, assuming that they mock the poor in their pathetic state, but also encourages his family to bring them into the house so that they might beg for money from Cathleen.

Cathleen ignores their insincere hospitality and immediately gives them what money she has. She can only give them a small amount and her empty purse, however,

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<sup>55</sup> J.J. Li Cribb, “Yeats, Blake and *The Countess Cathleen*,” *Irish University Review: A Journal of Irish Studies* 11:2 (Autumn 1981), 165.

<sup>56</sup> Critics debate the reason for Aleel’s increasing presence in the various permutations of this manuscript. While most argue that Aleel represents a Yeats figure to Donne’s Cathleen, Cribb (cited above) argues that it is actually the influence of Blake on the young poet’s artistic sensibilities that causes him to increasingly incorporate this distinctly pagan character.

because she has already given everything she had with her to the poor she passed. Yet she again proves her piety, and her Irish credibility, by inverting their hypocritical hospitality, inviting them instead to her house so that they might receive more money and food. Shemus and Cathleen, then, are set as foils to one another with Cathleen (at least initially) representing pious charity and Shemus representing the extremity of action that desperate need can inspire. Though Mary is moved by Cathleen's charity, Shemus is only angered. However, Shemus is not entirely unsympathetic, despite his ill treatment of the glorified Cathleen. After Mary points out that Cathleen even gave them her empty purse with the hope that they might sell the silver clasps, Shemus responds, "What's that for thanks,/Or what's the double of it that she promised,/With bread and flesh and every sort of food/Up to a price no man has heard the like of/And rising every day?" (CC, 33). Theirs is not a problem that can be solved by a small amount of alms. Food and money might satisfy their immediate need, but it does not offer any long term solution. This issue is important to the resolution of the play. Ultimately, Cathleen sells her own soul to feed her people, but the money the devils give her is also bound to run out. "Ironically, in sacrificing her soul to save those of the Peasants, Cathleen opens the way for their souls to be sacrificed. Eventually (they will be leaderless and vulnerable)."<sup>57</sup> Her people will at some point be back in the same situation they were before Cathleen's offering of money and the sacrifice of her soul.

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<sup>57</sup> [sic], Bert Cardullo, "Notes toward a Production of W.B. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 11:2 (Dec. 1985), 49; hereafter cited as NP.

Again, the problem with the peasants has progressed beyond that of simple physical need. After Cathleen leaves, Shemus<sup>58</sup> throws open the door to his hovel and invites in any devils that might be near. Two merchants quickly respond to his call, and he willingly shares food with them that he would have refused the pious Cathleen. He then strikes a bargain with these merchants that he and his son will sell their souls and also encourage others in their area to do the same. It is difficult, however, to see who the real villain is. The devils offer the peasants a tangible solution to their problems. They have effectively employed Shemus and Teigue and paid them enough money to satisfy any physical need they might have – something the Countess couldn't, or at least didn't do. Both royalty and religion have failed this family. Despite Mary's prayers, only two offers of aid have arrived – the wholly inadequate aid of the Countess and the unholy but adequate aid provided by the devils.

One could argue that the demon money is actually the lesser of two evils – in exchange for work the men are offered enough money so that they will never be in need again. Cathleen, however, can only offer the peasants enough to sustain them in the short term. Cardullo argues that “Cathleen may be viewed as wanting to save the Peasants' souls for the aristocracy; as wanting to keep their bodies in service to the feudal nobility, and out of the hands of businessmen” (*NP*, 63). Before she makes her fatal choice to sell her soul, she only offers them a cycle of subsistence, an offer of

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<sup>58</sup> The similarity between this character's name, “Shemus,” and the word “shame” should not be overlooked. More interesting, though, is that Shemus (or Shamus, which is the more common Celtic spelling) is the Irish form of the name James. Depending on the version of the New Testament consulted, James was either the most important apostle or the biological brother of Jesus (or both). Thus the play offers readers someone close to Christ who, because of his “shame” has been left degraded and vulnerable to the evil he invites into his home.

further charity. At the same time, the men's alliance with the devils effectively destroys any domestic relationship in the peasant home. Shemus strikes Mary when she refuses to cook for him, and she eventually starves to death because she refuses to betray her religion by benefiting from the money her husband earns. In the opening act the peasant home, the iconic space of shelter and protection, is twice breached by the outside world, and the end result is its destruction. The peasants are offered no truly satisfactory choice, and thus either choice spells their doom.

In the 1899 version of the play, Shemus and the evil "eastern merchants" who've come to purloin the peasants' souls are aligned against Cathleen and the peasant Mary (who respects the social order and doesn't share her husband Shemus's passionate hatred for the rich).<sup>59</sup> Yet determining who is "right" in the choices they make is not a simple matter. In the disorganized world of the famine-wrecked countryside, traditional rules of morality don't, necessarily, apply. Rather than positioning the Catholics against the Protestants and aligning Irish Protestantism with England (as one might expect a budding Irish nationalist playwright to do), Yeats shows that "Irish" means more than religion, and that at least on the surface, wealthy people can be good members of the

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<sup>59</sup> As stated above, the fact that Shemus's name sounds very similar to the moral indictment of shame should not be ignored - as neither should the fact that his wife, Mary, shares a name with the morally impenetrable mother of God. Yet whether these names are intended to be overtly symbolic, or subtly playful, depends upon the reader's interpretation of Yeats's overall intention. Also, it should be noted that Yeats's famous disdain for the middle class should not be confused with the negative portrayal of some peasants in this play. Yeats had very little understanding of any "reality" of peasant life, and considered them wholly to be symbolic constructs that could be manipulated per his artistic need. The Dublin middle class, however, comprised the greater portion of the ILT and the Abbey's audience, and Yeats's was intimately aware and disdainful of their repressive attitude towards art. The manifesto that serves as a mission statement for what would eventually become the Abbey Theatre quite famously points out that its interest is in art, and not at all in popular plays designed to entertain (or even to please) the audience.



nation.<sup>60</sup> He supports this distinction by emphasizing the historical aspect of Cathleen's authority. Tradition was used by Catholic nationalism to oppose English rule. Here Yeats makes use of that same idea of tradition to emphasize the retention of the Irish's religiously-based caste system. Mary, the greatest supporter of that tradition, both believes in and adheres to the tenets of her pagan past; she has no doubt that the demons in the forest are real, while at the same time she devoutly prays to a statue of the Virgin Mary. Shemus, on the other hand, mocks Mary's superstition *and* destroys her small shrine to the Holy Mother.<sup>61</sup> She believes in everything (and the order and obedience that those beliefs demand) and therefore is doomed to destroy herself. Her husband believes in nothing, and therefore can only destroy those around him. Yeats offers a cynical portrait of the damage that mindless fanaticism can create. Rather than give the audience an idealized representation of what they thought the classic western peasant should be, Yeats offers a diverse audience a mirror to reflect the damage that all their fractured differences and fanatical devotion could cause. In so doing, he hoped to make room for a form of nationalism that would be *inclusive* rather than *exclusive*, and it is in this desire that the audience grounded its greatest level of distrust.<sup>62</sup> In his effort

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<sup>60</sup> Yeats's position as a Protestant nationalist, one of many in this class that fought for independence from England from a privileged place within the empire, of course complicated his relationship to Irish nationalism and Irish independent identity. For more on this subject, see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>61</sup> Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996). Howes writes that "the text does not acknowledge the obvious contradictions between Christian and pagan belief, though its early readers were quick to do so; what is important about all Mary's pieties – her belief in Cathleen's rightful superiority, in Irish folk wisdom, and in Catholic doctrine, is that the play casts them as traditional Irish beliefs, the basis for a national culture, and as opposed to English materialism and imperialism" (53); hereafter cited as *YN*.

<sup>62</sup> Yeats conveniently neglects the fact that Cathleen, by her immense wealth, actually facilitates the poverty of the peasants. For Yeats, the only way to retain social order was for the wealthy to be generous and the poor to be grateful. A complete redistribution of wealth would have meant the destruction of

to include, he made a special point of including himself as the supreme authority and arbiter of authentic Irish nationalism.

Yet Yeats does not simply draw upon the conventional caste system for his attempt to present the new Ireland. Cathleen doesn't remain the fair and inviolate Countess for long. After her visit to the Rua hovel, the audience learns that Cathleen has apparently been away for so long that she cannot find her way back to her own home. She has become (or perhaps always was) a stranger in this land, disconnected from the problems it faces. More importantly, the area's problems are more likely the product of human corruption than of natural disaster. As A. Norman Jeffares and A.S. Knowland comment, "it is worth noting that there is plenty of food in the presumably Irish countess's house and on the mountains."<sup>63</sup> Once she finally returns home she gives orders to sell all she has – to empty her store of food and to distribute her reserves of gold to the people. But despite her piety, the audience is faced with a character not entirely beyond reproach. While her people have been starving, she has had stores of food and extensive wealth in reserve. Though she now decides to distribute this food and money to her people, her previous absence has most likely caused the physical and spiritual degradation that allowed for the invasion of the devils. She is also careful when giving directions to her stewards to "[keep] this house alone" (CC, 44). Though she is

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Yeats's own political and social position in Ireland, and as has been demonstrated earlier, Yeats's personal and national identities were always in communication with one another. Also, it should be noted that the middle class audience of ILT was of very little consequence to Yeats, especially in comparison to his artistic endeavors. However, he also had to keep the theatre financially solved and his greatest concern was with censorship in the arts. If he could convince the audience to be more inclusive in their understanding of Irish identity, he could be more experimental in his art.

<sup>63</sup> A. Norman Jeffares and A.S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1975), 7.

willing to give up much for her people, the real symbol of her status within the community, her castle or big house, must remain as one of her possessions.

In addition, though the Countess is self-sacrificing, she lacks the type of genuine religious faith epitomized by Mary's personal sacrifice. The merchants or devils easily trick Cathleen into believing that her stores of gold and food will not arrive in time to save her peasants, and thus she immediately decides upon the sacrificial act that closes the play. Before she sells her soul, though, she denies Aleel, who has proposed marriage. Her denial is not because of their difference in religion or social class, but because she has become like an "empty pitcher" (*CC*, 47). Obviously, "the poet Aleel corresponds to Yeats, who was deeply impressed by Maud Gonne's social and political engagement, and who in the early years of their relationship, at least, regretted bitterly that he could only offer her a love and art that were not socially or politically motivated" (*WBY*, 71). Yet Yeats's frustration at Gonne's willingness to sacrifice her personal happiness for the sake of social cause is clear. Cathleen has become an empty vessel because she has chosen a path of self-destruction rather than one of creation (such as that of the pagan poet or of the Irish mother figure).

Because of her single-minded decision, the result can only be tragedy and further misery. "The dilemma is to settle the relative claims of art, love, patriotism, and belief; to find a way to unit[e] these by fusing Irish paganism, traditional Christianity and an aesthetic faith in the occult symbols of artist mystics" (*VR*, 161). Yet a marriage of these disparate ideas, at least in the world Yeats stages in this version of the play, is as yet unattainable. Cathleen makes herself friendless, and willingly proceeds to her tragic

end. Yet Yeats, a student of tragedy, reminds the audience that this play does not follow the traditionally tragic (and thus heroic) mode.<sup>64</sup> Despite the fact that critics such as Richard Taylor argue that “there is no temptation [and]the heroine is not faced with viable alternatives,” Cathleen does have a choice, and could have (and perhaps should have) made a decision different from that which she made.<sup>65</sup> Her ships filled with food and money *are* on their way – her own faith falters and she is too quick to believe the lies told to her by the merchants. Also, the merchants themselves reinforce the fact that sinfulness cannot be obligatory. Mary dies of starvation rather than violate her faith and even the devils describe how they “cannot face the heavenly host in arms./Her soul must come to us of its own will” (CC, 48). They can use trickery and deceit, but they cannot use force. Cathleen, in essence, chooses her own fate.

In Yeats’s mind, the real problem illustrated by this play is the impossible position in which Christianity places its followers, especially women. Aleel, the pagan, points this irony out to the audience. He is a “man of songs. . . stand[ing] for an art both spiritual and national,” and rather than subjugate himself to the hopeless martyrdom of religion, he has chosen to give his soul, in love, “to the Christian Cathleen. [Therefore]

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<sup>64</sup> Yeats was developing his ideas with regards to Greek tragedy and the Irish theatre at the same time he composed this play. Though the initial prose version of *The Countess Cathleen* was composed nearly a decade earlier, by 1899 Yeats would frustrate his audience’s desire for realism by instead drawing upon tragedy, a style with a long relationship to questions of nation and national identity. However, since the play does not seem to follow most of the conventions of traditional tragedy (specifically, its my contention that Cathleen is not bound to follow through with her ultimate end. She has a choice and by making the wrong choice, she affects the overall interpretation of the play and the conception of national identity presented). Thus, the relationship between the two will not be explored in detail here. However, Yeats’s views on tragedy are outlined in his essay “The Theatre,” *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 165-72.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Taylor, *The Drama of W.B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese No* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1976), 10.

the devils cannot take it from her” (VR, 161). Through his act of love, he is the only one truly safe from the demons. He tells himself:

Impetuous heart, be still, be still,  
Your sorrowful love can never be told,  
Cover it up with a lonely tune.  
He who could bend all things to His will  
Has covered the door of the infinite fold  
With the pale stars and the wandering moon. (CC, 52)

The pagan Aleel is given the voice to accuse who he and the author both feel to genuinely be at fault. If God, be it the Catholic or the Protestant version, can bend all things to His will, then he could prevent the famine, the degeneration of the people, and the ultimate sacrifice of Cathleen that keeps her from marrying Aleel. The same God could have kept Ireland under its own control, thus freeing Maud Gonne to marry Yeats. The real fault of the people is their dedication to religion, whether that dedication comes in the form of filial obligation or active but directed rejection. Because of their religion, Cathleen is forced to open the doors of her home to the starving peasants, and Mary is forced to leave her home and her life to eat grass like an animal, and eventually to die of starvation. God, Yeats feels, “covered the door” and left His people to fend for themselves. That same religion divides the audience, preventing them from working together to obtain their common goal of a stable system of government.

And Yeats’s effort at displaying what he infers to be God’s capricious attitude towards his devoted parishioners continues throughout the depictions of the other characters in the play. The souls of the peasant people seem to have values that rest on a sliding scale. Despite religious rhetoric to the contrary, God does not love all of his people equally and, consequently, the merchants place varying values on different souls.

The more pious the individual, the more that soul is worth, but this creates a situation where piety works *in favor* of the gold-for-souls exchange. The truer one is to God and to his or her faith, the more money that person can eventually gain by trading in their soul. God's demand for utter and complete obedience actually acts as a selfish incentive. If a peasant can be "good" up to the point of sale, then God doesn't win. Instead, His own economy of souls creates a further motivation for His people to sell. In addition, the merchants remind the people that "cryings out and sighs are the soul's work,/And you have none"(CC, 57). In a land where poverty and degradation have ravaged the land and left the people powerless to do anything *but* hopelessly cry out for help, the idea of a state of existence incapable of pain might actually be preferable to piety and devotion to a Christian God who offers them no respite. Cathleen sells her soul to save her people, but also to release herself from the pain that seeing their suffering causes. And despite this selfish motive, in the end she is rewarded with heaven. Yeats's play shows the audience that organized Christianity not only allows for such "sin," it facilitates it.

The plot's relatively simple structure belies this complicated indictment of religion. By depicting both Catholic peasants and a Protestant Countess willing to offer up their souls for gold, Yeats ensured that "nationalists made the largest part of the crowd, not only officially nonpolitical nationalists like the Gaelic League's president, Douglas Hyde, but political ones too, like Arthur Griffith, editor of *United Ireland* and

future president of Sinn Féin.”<sup>66</sup> These nationalists, then, were forced to witness the damage that religious fanaticism could cause, and it was hoped that such exposure would increase their hunger for a new national icon.

Yet for public officials who established their power along religious lines, Yeats had to carefully camouflage his message. On the surface the play offers a Countess who, when faced with the starvation of her people, selflessly offers to sell her soul in exchange for enough money to feed her people, and for the return of her peasants’ souls. The peasants’ acts are politically understandable, in that they can be attributed to a famine commonly thought to be propagated by English disinterest in Irish problems. Despite this gesture towards politically correct subterfuge, though, the representations were (even before the first official performance) deemed offensive to a mainstream audience.<sup>67</sup> Despite the fact that both the Countess and the peasants were forced into their decisions by manipulative demons and an all-encompassing famine, in a venue that promised to depict the new Irish identity, patriotically separating itself from England and its corruptive influence, the idea that *both* religious groups (and therefore, all of Ireland) could be so equally wicked was problematic. The Irish Literary Theatre promised in their manifesto “to show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.” Obvious heretical behavior and “ancient idealism,” at least on the surface, seemed at best contradictory, and at worst overtly confrontational.

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<sup>66</sup> Adrian Frazier, “The Making of Meaning: Yeats and *The Countess Cathleen*,” *Sewanee Review* 95:3 (Summer 1987), 451; hereafter cited as *MMY*.

<sup>67</sup> For a further discussion of why the play might have been offensive to Irish audiences (and in this author’s mind, continues to be offensive) see Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), 18-20.

In addition, the play was set during the famine – a disaster the political implications of which were still enough to spark heated debate or even violence between the Catholic and Protestant audience members. The potato famine was less than three quarters of a century in the past, and at least among the Catholics, it was perceived to be a time when the Protestant elite turned away from the needy Catholic peasants and left them to die. This common perception, then, led to surprise and perhaps immediate distrust of the protagonist Cathleen, a landlord and a Protestant who (according to some interpretations) the play presents as a great heroine ready to sell her soul for her starving people. The mere introduction of the issue was enough to set emotions on edge. Only months later the Queen's would produce Hubert O'Grady's *The Famine*, an overt indictment of the government's treatment of the peasants during the 1840s, and the differences between the two plays' receptions are significant. Dublin audiences had a positive reaction to *The Famine*, but both political parties responded with confusion and anger to *The Countess Cathleen*.

Protestant members of the audience took immediate offense to the idea that one of their own would ever sell her soul, regardless of the circumstances. Cathleen's willingness to sell her soul could have been perceived as a selfless act of sacrifice that in the end was rewarded by heaven. However, at a time when the stage Irishman representation of Irish nationality, a representation that grouped Protestant and Catholic alike under an umbrella Irish "other," was still common on English stages, sensitivity would have been pronounced – especially to any depiction of an Irish man or woman that was both unflattering and linked to religion. Frazier argues that the nature of the



Irish people, both Protestant and Catholic, made their reaction nearly inevitable. He states that two conditions in the Irish collective psyche unified them in their negative response, and that this response had more to do with a rejection of externally imposed identity construction than personal or individual reactions to the play itself.

1) Ireland, still in the grip of a hyperpuritanical public morality, was quick to sense slights against religion and that morality; 2) Ireland, still a colony, though largely nationalist, was quick to sense slights to its patriotic pride . . . it is nothing in the play that makes it significant, but something about the backward Irish. (*MMY*, 454)

The Irish's "backwardness" aside, what is made clear by the responses of both political parties is that the audience's understanding of stage presentation was one that demanded that the characters on stage mirror the *idealized* identity conceived by the figures in the audience. Yet what is also made clear is that though the audience was not able to unify under the new icon Yeats hoped to promote, they *were* able to unify in their rejection of her. Despite the different path taken, the final destination was the same.

The answer to why the audience's refusal was so pronounced and so cohesive, then, is the real importance of *The Countess Cathleen*. The most common refusal of a character or an action during a play produced at this time was that a "good Irish woman/man/Catholic/Protestant would never do/say anything like that." Challenging the idea that anyone in Ireland wasn't *good* was something English stages – not Irish – did. What was also clear was that Yeats's idealized conception differed greatly from the idealized conception of the audience.<sup>68</sup> The play seemed to promise both a "real" Ireland (because it was visible) and an "ideal" Ireland (because it was, ostensibly, "art"). The play was bound to produce controversy, then, because the audience could never

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<sup>68</sup> Yeats's interest was in a tragic style, where the audience's interpretation was based in religion.

accept that either a real or ideal Ireland would include so many sinners, and Yeats was determined to leave such anti-aesthetic concepts as “sin” behind. As Halio writes, for Yeats the play was first a love story (for the 1899 version he inserts the tellingly autobiographical love scene between Aleel and the Countess), second a foray into verse drama, and finally a chance to explore the continuing contrast between “Christian duty and pagan pleasure,” a notion he considered to be a key concept of Irish identity (*PL*, 13). Thus unity was his goal, and unity he did achieve; but instead of unifying his audience in an acceptance of the new Irish icon, he unified them in their distrust of the purpose of and motivation behind the new Irish Literary Theatre.

### **Winning over the Warriors**

Thus the depiction of an Irish national icon, especially at this stage of her dramatic evolution, was problematic at best. In *The Countess Cathleen* the audience is presented with two heroic women, but both are flawed. Mary remains true to her faith, eventually starving to death in order to protect her piety. Yet in protecting her piety she disobeys her husband and destroys any possibility of a reinstatement of domestic tranquility. Cathleen, her Protestant counterpart, is willing to sacrifice her soul – and thus her piety, to save her people, making her a Christ-like figure. Yet Henry Popkin minimizes this sacrifice, saying “every thought and every emotion seem no more than . . . stock . . . Christian attitudes. Lady Cathleen gives up her soul; the sacrifice is great but conventional.”<sup>69</sup> Yeats himself, speaking specifically of this first stage production of the

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<sup>69</sup> Henry Popkin, “Yeats as Dramatist,” *Tulane Drama Review* 3:3 (Mar. 1959), 73.

play, says that it is no “more than a piece of tapestry. The Countess sells her soul, but she is not transformed.”<sup>70</sup>

Yet despite the fact that she is not transformed within the play, what she represents is a transformation of the national icon from the helpless and hopeless stage Irishman to something that might some day evolve into a symbol of national pride and alliance. The Countess represents an important step, for Yeats and for Ireland, towards the kind of nationalist satisfaction later found in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The Countess is not yet the perfect national icon – she is flawed. She sees a problem and acts decisively to solve it, protecting her people, but with questionable motivation. Her sacrifice comes from a lack of faith that Houlihan never displays. The Countess’s ships are only three days away, and if she had more patience, she could have helped her people without giving up her position of leadership by giving up her life. In addition, in making her sacrifice she becomes an empty vessel, and thus love with Aleel, and the security associated with the establishment of any kind of real, domestic home, becomes impossible. Finally, she is destroyable. Though God reverses her decision and takes her soul to heaven, she does, at the end of the play, die. Her pain is simply transferred to Aleel and Oona who mourn her loss, and there is no mention of what will happen to her people once the money her soul gained for them is spent. She solves her nation’s problem in the short term, but in so doing gives up any possibility of offering them further comfort and protection.

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<sup>70</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 416-17. By tapestry, Yeats most likely meant a backdrop or tableau. In the older versions of the play, no real evolution of the character of Cathleen, no real dramatic tension is seen. This issue was one he tried to resolve through his various revisions of the play (as can be witnessed in the *Variorum* edition, cited above).

In other words, the play demonstrates how Yeats attempted to amalgamate certain qualities of Irish femininity into his powerful Irish icon, but it also shows the impossibility of collecting all of those qualities in this particular character. In order to work all of the necessary traits into the play, Yeats had to present two saints, rather than the single national Goddess he would offer in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Mary offered piety, and Cathleen presented purity. Cathleen actively protected her people, but Mary's motivation was beyond reproach. Mary was a married woman with a son, and therefore a woman experienced sexually, yet Cathleen was unmarried and presumably a virgin, and therefore in a position to receive the romantic advances of Aleel. Most importantly, Mary was a Catholic peasant, and Cathleen was a Protestant aristocrat. Even while telling the tale as a fable or miracle play, Yeats could not ignore the necessity of acknowledging the religious and class differences that divided his country. For Yeats, Cathleen's status, combined with her femininity, "inscribed the double-edged virtues of the Celts: idealism, self-sacrifice and spiritual victory through the material defeat and impoverishment, as well as the class hierarchies connected with them" (YN, 45). Yeats had yet to perfect a character that could unite these disparate traits into a single individual, but that individual was soon to come. In the mean time, *The Countess Cathleen* offered important progress in the Irish Literary Theatre's efforts toward a unifying dramatic mirror. As has been stated above, "the 'holy peasant' became a symbol to the nationalists of the unique qualities of life which distinguished Ireland as a whole from atheistic and immoral England."<sup>71</sup> At the same time, the position of being

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<sup>71</sup> James W. Flannery, *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1976), 151.

one of the Protestant Ascendancy and being offered Protestant money, especially initially, to fund the production of the plays the artist created was what gave Yeats the authority to act as aesthetic educator and national spokesperson. Thus an inclusion of both *had* to be achieved, even at the cost of character continuity or a positive reception by the audience.

The problem was compounded by the fact that the foundation of these religious and class identities, and the idealisms that accompanied them, were as indefinable as the nature or essence of the womanhood it hoped to portray. These concepts were as contradictory as the patriarchal requirements frequently placed upon women in order to establish themselves as worthy of representing a nation. For instance, the Celtic romanticism of the period relied on a claim to naturalness, the revival of ancient and somehow more “true” aspects of Irish identity that had been buried or rejected through the domination of the British. One of the main motivations for the Celtic Revival was the desire to reclaim qualities perceived to be inherent in the Irish that British colonization (through language changes, mapmaking, public schools, etc.) actively destroyed. These various attempts at presenting the “natural Irishman,” however, frequently resulted in riots for the simple reason that the varied body of Irish people couldn’t coalesce to form a single definition. As Ann Saddlemyer writes, the “‘celtic revival’ . . . was essentially a re-naming and re-ordering of a familiar trait, the ‘folk spirit,’” but exactly whose responsibility it was (or even who might possess the necessary background and authority) to reach back to that state of authenticity and accurately conduct such a

process was unclear.<sup>72</sup> The political hierarchy established the British-educated and primarily Protestant class as the group with both the intellectual and artistic authority, but the politically powerless Catholics had claim to Celtic authenticity, and women themselves, regardless of their education or religious background, had very little opportunity to offer any input in the gendered constructions that were being conceived.

Since Celtic romanticism called for the recovery of old themes, old symbols, and a more “natural” state of Irishness, the analogous role of the female was put through the same redefinition process. Ironically, this revolutionary redefinition of femininity employed in the service of constituting a national icon resulted in the most conservative, strict, and idealized definition to develop into the *only* definition popularly perceived to be “true.” Though the public couldn’t reach an agreement with regards to what it meant to be Irish, Irish men and women found their point of union with regards to what it meant to be an Irish *female*. Celticism called for the veneration of the peasant, so female peasant-hood was defined as untouchably chaste, untemptibly pious, and unceasingly committed to retaining the social order. There are obvious political benefits from this narrow concept of femininity. The chaste aspect of the female character highlighted the gendered relationship between colonizer and colonized. A conspicuously chaste woman makes up for her lack of physical size with her inviolate mind – though she is conquerable as part of a nation, she is nonetheless essentially inviolate. The protective strength this exemplifies always casts the conqueror in the role of the failed villain. Her corporeal body protects some physical space that the Irish might retain as their own. At

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<sup>72</sup> Ann Saddlemeyer, “The Cult of the Celt: Pan-Celticism in the 90s,” *The World of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Ann Saddlemeyer and Robin Skelton (Victoria, BC: U of British Columbia P, 1965), 1.

the same time, her pious devotion to her faith emphasizes her willing submission if and when she is placed under what the patriarchal society identifies as a “good” authority – namely, her husband, the church, and a localized national government. She is non-threatening and remains a possible lover because once the top of the power structure shifts to the “right” authority, the good female Irish patriot can return to her home and care for her family.

Finally, her willingness to sustain the gender-based social order provides comfort to a populace troubled by the winds of revolution. Even if the national political system collapses, the gender relations necessary to provide stable homes for good Irish warriors would remain. It is important to remember that in *Cathleen*, Mary defies her husband but submits to her Mistress Cathleen, and therefore to the law. She “shows exaggerated respect and thankfulness to the countess, then dies of starvation” (*MMY*, 458). Cathleen, too, retains her socially prescribed position. She offers up all she has in an effort to protect her people, but she is careful to retain her house, the icon of her social status, which is also her “home,” the icon of her gender. The role of the woman and of the peasant is to be grateful for the generosity of the ruling class. The role of the ruling class is *noblesse oblige*. It is true that Cathleen admits she would marry Aleel if the political situation were different, saying “If the old tales are true,/Queens have wed shepherds and kings beggar-maids;/God’s procreant waters flowing about your mind have made you more than kings or queens” (*CC*, 47). It is Cathleen’s status, however, that allows her to make such a choice, and only because it would be ordained by God and precedent had

been set by the peasants' "old tales." She doesn't challenge the *status quo* with this proclamation. Rather, she supports it.<sup>73</sup>

Yeats's interest was in retaining the class system while remaining revolutionary, and therefore his interests were in conflict with a substantial part of his audience. The national consciousness was simply not developed enough to accept any negative depiction of itself on the stage. Frazier explains why the play's depiction of peasants who are lascivious, larcenous, and sacrilegious is more than just personally offensive – why it could constitute an act of near treason against the developing national character. An audience at this time was bound to see much more substantial and sinister national allegory behind the peasants' sins than what the author might have intended. Frazier goes on to say that "the playwright might have provoked less reaction from his audience if he had made one sinner a miser, another an incendiary, and a third a believer in faeries – typical vices of the people in the nineteenth-century novel, and in the eyes of the church" (*MMY*, 457). The famine decimated millions of families, and was certainly felt more by those with many children than by those with few. Being a chaste (and therefore childless) woman would have been a blessing. Yet one peasant is denied a high price for her soul because "It's certain that the man she's married to/Knows nothing of what's hidden in the jar/Between the hour-glass and the pepper pot" (*CC*, 55). A woman who strayed from her husband's bed and took additional lovers increased her chance of having more children, and therefore increased the burden on her husband to provide food and shelter. The end result could be the eventual starvation of the family.

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<sup>73</sup> Obviously, she also fulfills Yeats's fantasy of Maud Gonne accepting his proposal of marriage.



In addition, poverty during the famine was so pronounced that petty theft wouldn't simply increase the thief's wealth, but might condemn the original owner to starvation. The crime would have been closer to murder than to thievery. Therefore when another peasant is denied a high price for his soul because "He is wakeful from a dread of growing poor,/And thereon wonders if there's any man/That he could rob in safety," the implication is that his crime is far greater than simple thievery (*CC*, 54). He's protecting himself from the possibility of starvation by feeding off of his neighbors. The announcement leads another peasant to respond with "I will not trust my mother after this" (*CC*, 54). In an effort to help the audience unify under a single national icon, Yeats actually underscores how quick the populace is to turn against one another.

Yet in Yeats's mind, the play was an attempt to present his concept of an idealized Ireland and the kind of savior or heroine he felt capable of rescuing the people. A peasant believing in faeries might have been condemned by the church, but Yeats found the peasants' superstitions to be one of their most valuable qualities, and a peasant starting fires would hardly have necessitated the intervention of the Countess, his artistic and symbolic depiction not only of Ireland, but of his beloved Maud Gonne. Finally, an Irish miser was almost a contradiction in terms – and in the context of this play, the only real cache of food is found in the Countess's stores. An indictment of an Irish miser would have been an indictment of the Irish aristocracy. Beyond these physical issues, though, Yeats's goal was a lofty one – to challenge the audience to move beyond simplistic and conventional depictions so that they might accept a combination of religious faiths and of all the different positive aspects of the female gender.

And just as the peasants were symbolic of what Ireland had to protect, Cathleen, the protector, was also a symbol – and symbols couldn't be weighted with worldly concerns such as audience reception or sensibility. It is in this feature, then, that the play most dooms itself to failure.<sup>74</sup> Cathleen is so quick to prove her selflessness, to give up her riches for her people, that she neglects to recognize the fact that the merchants are tricking her. She is literally selfless to a fault. It is important to remember that she is a literary construct, but also an embodiment of Maud Gonne (at least initially) and at the time this play was first conceived, artistic interest in the Celtic Twilight was only in its infancy. Peasants were idealized, but their folk culture was unstudied.<sup>75</sup> When challenged with regards to the different prices paid for different souls, Yeats claimed that the opinions were those of the devil – and not his (Qtd. in *MMY*, 458).

The entire play demonstrates this quantifying value, despite the fact that an economy of souls would almost assuredly be offensive to an audience expecting only depictions of Irish purity. Within the context of the play, the peasants, the devils and the Countess all take it as a matter of course that certain souls are worth more than others, and that Cathleen's sacrifice more than supersedes any material suffering on the part of the peasants. In fact, her soul is worth enough not only to feed and support the peasants, but also to warrant the return of their souls already sold, *and* inspire God himself to turn his eyes back to Earth and send a battalion of angels to bring Cathleen to heaven. It's

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<sup>74</sup> The play's dependence on symbolism would have been in direct contrast to the realism common to stages at the time. See Chapter I for a discussion of how the Irish Literary Theatre's manifesto specifically rejects the popular theatre and instead hoped to offer something wholly new and "better," regardless of whether or not it pleased the audience.

<sup>75</sup> In the introduction to his 1912 version, Yeats explains his new ending as existing "not for dramatic or poetic reasons, but to suit audiences that even in Dublin, know little of Irish mythology" (*PL*, 14).

easy to understand why some members of the audience, religious or not, might take offense, especially when they were not made privy to Yeats's intentions beforehand. Yet in some ways, the audience did seem to share the perspective that God recognizes a hierarchy of worthiness – Yeats's mirror might not have been as warped as the audience would *like* to have thought. For instance, though Shamus beats his wife and then crushes the statue of Mary, it's the destruction of the religious icon that led to objection and not the violence against the peasant woman.<sup>76</sup> Personal bodies, even idealized female bodies, were expendable, but socially unifying structures (religion, marriage, morality) were blindly protected, and Yeats found this blindness a major fault in his people.

### **Romancing the Row**

Yeats eliminated some of the more inflammatory images in the prose version for the stage production, but this particular incident of an angry peasant destroying the image of the Virgin fueled a heated public debate about the performance of the play, before it was ever staged. Yeats's intention, though, was never to remove entirely the inflammatory sections. Yeats believed that "a commercial audience was the enemy of the ideal theatre," and the more he could, as Robert Russell put it, "get up a row at the performance," the more powerful, and thus the more successful, he imagined his play to be (*YL*, 210). Yeats's passion for Maud Gonne and her political fervor fueled his reworking of the draft for years, but still he was (compared to his familiarity with poetry) relatively inexperienced in the production of stage drama at the time of the 1899

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<sup>76</sup> The actual destruction of the religious icon was removed from later versions of the play because audiences consistently found it too offensive. See the variorum edition of Yeats's plays (cited above) for the evolution of the first scene of *The Countess Cathleen*.

production. What he did excel in, however, was the management of publicity. Though he professed to despise what he would have termed the lowbrow entertainment presented at theatres like the Queen's that courted the shouts and applause of the rowdy Irish audience, Yeats was more than willing to play off the fiery Irish temperament and political sensitivities to ensure a full audience at the time of opening.

Due to the attention from the O'Donnell pamphlet, newspapers such as *The Daily Express* gave the play free publicity, specifically because they felt its "lofty theme might reform the theatre – a place filled with immorality." At the same time *Beltaine*, a magazine edited by Yeats, quoted Yeats as saying the play (along with Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field*) would help to promote the national theatre because the plays would demonstrate how "Ireland is romantic and *spiritual* rather than scientific and analytical" (*PL*, 12). Meanwhile, the *Daily Nation* ran regular attacks on Yeats, his play, and the new Irish Literary Theatre because of its perceived anti-Catholic nature. Yeats was quick to condemn Ireland for its "hyper-sensitive, hyper-puritanical public morality," and clearly wanted to make for his country a more cosmopolitan (and some might say, elitist) national art (*ILT*, 30-31).

By this time Yeats realized that his play was destined to be controversial, and that controversy was not, necessarily, a bad thing. Yeats was an infamous self-promoter, who by his own efforts had tirelessly publicized his way into an early poetic career. He now applied those same tactics to his theatre. In fact, in Yeats's mind controversy and success were almost inseparable. He was well aware of the attention the new theatre and its plays were receiving, and was not insensitive to the effect that that attention might

have on his own book sales. In a letter addressed to the publisher of his *Poems*, he expressed his desire for the book to be made available for purchase *before* the first performance of *Cathleen*. He writes that “it is most important that [*Poems*] be out as soon as possible . . . the chief sales would be before the performance while people are curious and expectant. This Theatre has made a very great stir in Dublin & Edward Martyns[sic] play, which is far less known of than mine, is having a very large sale in Dublin” (Qtd. in *CCN*, 194). It seems that *Cathleen* wasn’t the only Protestant willing to sell her soul for gold.

Yet financial success was only one of Yeats’s goals. As has been stated above, Yeats imagined for his Ireland a new type of drama and a new aesthetic sensibility – one that would not only allow for but encourage an *avant garde*, experimental atmosphere as well as provide inspiration for the nationalist movement. His literary theatre would be intentionally elitist, a place to teach rather than to be entertained, and would thus need as much publicity – and as much controversy – as possible, if it were to avoid simply fading away. A debate in the letters section of the English newspapers between the producer William Archer and the novelist George Moore contemplated the mere possibility of “literary” drama. Adrian Frazier recounts that “Archer said *The Countess Cathleen* would make a boring and expensive production; Yeats and Moore replied that it need not be expensive” (*MMY*, 463). In Yeats’s mind, whether or not the audience was bored was their own business. His fight was as much for the publicity surrounding the play as for the production itself. The political spectrum of the early financial backers of the Irish Literary Theatre promised an audience of mixed political backgrounds.

More important, though, was the famous public attack by O'Donnell, who ironically, since he was a well-known enemy of Yeats, received a copy of the script of *The Countess Cathleen* in advance (CCN, 195). *The Saturday Review* sent both Max Beerbohm and Arthur Symons to review the play's opening performance.<sup>77</sup> An additional irony (and telling clue as to Yeats's primary motivation) was that though the press managed to receive copies of the play well in advance of the initial performance, the performance group itself did not. As a result, Yeats was forced to write to his publisher and request 20 makeshift copies be bound and sent as soon as possible in order that each of the actors, the director, the prompter and the producers might have copies from which to work. In essence, Yeats set the stage for his dramatic revolution outside the theatre.<sup>78</sup> He understood that in this volatile climate, for a play to be productive it had to produce emotion before, during and after the audience occupied the building.

In addition, Yeats understood the financial benefit of a negative as well as a positive review, and what mattered most at this initial stage of the dramatic game (especially when the author could snub a negative review with a simple "he doesn't understand") was that the theatre got attention – and the new Irish Literary Theatre did, indeed, get attention. Lady Gregory had, for her own part, stocked the audience with wealthy people of both property and title, seemingly attempting to frame the play as literary rather than nationalist (MMY, 451). Though the mission statement of the theatre claimed to be above politics, however, *The Countess Cathleen* did everything it could to

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<sup>77</sup> See Richard Ellmann's *The Man and the Masks* and R.F. Foster's *Yeats: A Life* for further discussion of Yeats's courting of controversial publicity during this period in his career.

<sup>78</sup> Yeats's interest in courting the press is discussed throughout this study, but is examined in detail in Christopher Morash's *A History of the Irish Theatre: 1601-2000* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 118; hereafter cited as *HIT*.

court a political debate. Despite Lady Gregory's attempts, "nationalists made the largest part of the crowd, not only officially nonpolitical nationalists like the Gaelic League's president, Douglas Hyde, but political ones too, like Arthur Griffith, editor of *United Ireland* and the future president of Sinn Fein" (*MMY*, 451). Rumors from the time explained Griffith's motivation for appearing at the play as an effort to show support for anything a Catholic Cardinal would condemn – "a play that presented the Irish as a people eager to sell their souls for gold, that said souls came at different prices, and that illustrated as features of Irish life some peasants who stole, some who committed sacrilege, and one woman hell-bent on fornication" (*MMY*, 451).

Yeats was quick to fan the emotional flame. He made sure to have a number of Dublin police officers standing along the back wall of the theatre, even before the production – and the commotion – began. Frazier discusses numerous examples of Yeats's eagerness to "call [any] opposition a mob and any protest a 'riot.'" Interestingly, Frazier also relates how reports of the *Cathleen* riots differ depending on the source. One Dublin theatre diarist counts "twenty . . . beardless idiots" as responsible for the commotion, while T.W. Rolleston, president of the Dublin Irish Literary Society counts twelve. Either count would be fairly common for a significantly less controversial theatrical performance at the time, and would hardly warrant the police presence insisted upon by Yeats.<sup>79</sup> Ronald Schuchard reports that despite the flamboyant arguments in the newspapers prior to the performance, "after the curtain went up on *The Countess Cathleen* . . . the performance met with milder disturbances than anticipated" (*CCR*, 26).

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<sup>79</sup> See *MMY* for a more thorough explanation of these discrepancies, and their relative importance to other famous Irish drama riots.

Obviously, regardless of a few carefully chosen audience members or Yeats's claim that art rose above politics and the "real," the play was determined to offend, but those it offended were as much actors in Yeats's drama as the individuals on stage. He was able to get his play and his theatre attention, and spark a discussion about national icons and national identity. And in the process, he won over some converts to his cause.<sup>80</sup>

Only a few of the more extreme literary critics contemporary with the play objected to *Cathleen* on the grounds of its representations of immorality – namely, the selling of souls for gold. Many, in fact, supported Cathleen's decision to sell her soul as a sacrifice for her people. An amusing anecdote illustrating such support comes from the ladies of the Viceregal Lodge. All were noble, English, and therefore Protestant, and all were so moved by the flattering depiction of the noble Cathleen that they begged Yeats to allow them to perform scenes from the play as a series of *tableaux vivants*. Yeats refused, writing to his sister that "of course, as a nationalist, [I] could not go anywhere near the chief secretary's lodge, much less take part in the performance; but as a gentleman [I] did not refuse to meet the ladies in Betty Balfour's house to advise them about costumes" (*MMY*, 457). These women's willingness to be cast as Yeats's problematic heroine illustrates the intricate nature of the production. These *tableaux* performers completely missed the subtleties of the paganism embodied by Aleel, as well as Cathleen's culpability in her people's plight. Similarly, Yeats was conveniently blind enough to satisfy his nationalism by avoiding the chief secretary's home, but at the same

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<sup>80</sup> The audience wasn't composed only of angry Catholics or the Protestant elite. One famous attendee, James Joyce, "came to bear witness to the independence of Art" (*MMY*, 452).



time assuage his artistic desire for a proper performance by meeting with the women to consult on costuming.

In essence, the problem with the play *as a nationalist drama* was that it was wholly symbolic, and the system of symbols it relied upon housed their meanings in the mind of the artist – rather than in the collective imagination of the people. The play simply wasn't mimetic enough to be considered faithful to the nationalist movement, or an Irish national theatre. Since the "peasant" was considered the symbol of everything old (and therefore good) in Irish culture, the depiction of the peasant was of critical importance, and importance *to* critics. In addition the famine, the symbolic "landlord," tenancy, rents and souperism were all historically verifiable conflicts heavily referenced in *Catholic* nationalism's art and political rhetoric. Yet the conventional use of these ideas was in direct conflict with the primary figure of the play – the pious and protective *Protestant* landlord Cathleen. Since this depiction of these figures was highly metaphorical, however, with their relationship being symbolic rather than realistic (at least to Yeats), there could be no "real" real to which the representations might be compared. Yeats's national female icon was still developing and she would not reach her full potential until she resurfaced as *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Critics were forced simply to claim that Yeats didn't know the Irish peasant, whom they perceived to be the real object of the play, which meant that he didn't know the real Ireland.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Probably closer to the truth was that Yeats was trying to train his audience to see his class as the rightful leaders of Irish nationalism and republicanism in the tradition of the 1798 movement. Cathleen, then, would stand in for Yeats's class who he perceived as sacrificing themselves for the liberation of the indigenous Irish.

With all of the cheering, the jeering, and the foot stomping that Yeats's play prompted,<sup>82</sup> it is easy to see that Yeats and his company failed in their first (debatable) attempt to stand outside of any political questions (*HIT*, 118). This failure, however, did not stop with politics. As Morash writes, "most of the audience was simply bewildered . . . Although no one would have admitted it, the stage world of the conventional Irish play was solidly secular in that all of the machinery necessary for the resolution of the plot was displayed (often spectacularly) before the audience's eyes" (*HIT*, 199-200). Yeats's Ireland, on the other hand, was metaphorical, with demons and angels interacting ritualistically with the people in order to reference a spiritual world beyond the present corporeal one. Yeats's composite portrait of the Irish soul and attempt at depicting the Irish ideal woman was, at best, surreal in its style, and the average Irish audience, especially an audience enticed by the promise of the politically inspired commotion hinted at by the title of "national theatre" and the press that preceded opening night, expected the simple plot and straightforward characters presented in plays popular at the Queen's. The reaction of many was that Yeats simply didn't understand how to write a play (a reaction that he, too, probably shared, if one considers his almost obsessive rewriting of the play in the coming years). Of course, though the immediate result could not be termed a success, both Yeats and Ireland were loathe to give up easily. *The Countess Cathleen*, the Irish Literary Theatre and Ireland itself would all go through numerous revisions in the years to come.

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<sup>82</sup> According to Morash, it was rumored at the time that the editor of the *United Irishman*, Arthur Griffith, hired a number of coalmen to sit in the back of the theatre and applaud anything and everything that might offend the Catholic Church (*HIT*, 118).

Yeats's desire to find the ideal in order to instruct the real wasn't yet a desire shared by the paying public. At this point in Irish history, *any* negative aspect of an Irish character needed to be downplayed in order to achieve popular approval from diverse Dublin audiences. The years of subjection to the stage-Irishman, coupled with the need for a locus of identity reflection, made this particular representation one of crucial importance. To complicate matters further, there were different aspects of national identity competing for prominence. Yeats's play demonstrates the Protestant ascendancy/*avant garde* artistic approach to the "old themes" commonly appropriated for Catholic nationalism. Cathleen represents Mother Ireland, but she's a Protestant mother – a martyr Countess with enough strength and humility necessary to just barely make her recognizable as Erin. Yet she would not survive as Mother Ireland. As a product of fable, the true Erin precedes Christian religion and the inherent conflicts such an affiliation would cause. Cathleen is able to offer the other side of Irish identity often ignored by Catholic nationalists, but she is more an older sister to the Catholics' Erin than a new and inclusive embodiment. For the real Cathleen, the audience would have to wait for *ni Houlihan*.

## CHAPTER III

### *CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN AND THE COLLABORATIVE NATION*

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* is, in terms of its strange power, its sustained popularity, and its authorship, one of the great continuing controversies of Irish theatre. W.B. Yeats is commonly credited as being the author, and in his own poetic work “The Man and the Echo” he asks himself “Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?”<sup>83</sup> The play’s authorship, however, has been much debated in current scholarship. James Pethica has done a great deal to resolve this controversy by painstakingly analyzing the original, handwritten drafts of the play and the claims, both public and private, of Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats. Pethica has concluded that the play is largely the result of a collaboration on the part of these two key figures, with the general idea originating with Yeats, but the bulk of the peasant action and dialogue coming from Lady Gregory. In addition, the enduring power of the original performance of Maud Gonne in the role of the Old Woman should not be ignored. Her political power and personal presence were essential to the play’s initial ability to transcend simple entertainment and to instead instruct the audience with regards to the importance of the message contained in the production. The result of this collaborative effort is a combination of stage realism and symbolism that managed to bridge the gap between the audience and the artists, giving Ireland one of its most enduring national icons and most popular nationalist plays.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Selected Poems and Four Plays* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 211.

<sup>84</sup> James Pethica, “‘Our Kathleen’: Yeats’s Collaboration with Lady Gregory in the Writing of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*,” *Yeats and Women*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1997), 205-222; hereafter cited as *OK*. Pethica also offers an historical recounting of the critical analyses of this play with regards to the

The resulting discussion raises interesting questions about the original stage production, the distinctively collaborative nature of the author(s), and the intersection between the performance of personal and national identity. Though Yeats was recognized as the “author” of the play at the time of its first performances, many scholars, James Pethica most convincingly, now argue that Lady Gregory was responsible for the greater authorship of the work, and Maud Gonne’s initial performance in the role of the Old Woman (and her position as President of the Daughters of Erin) accounted for much of the play’s initial popularity and mysterious emotional power. Pethica writes that “many early critics either discounted Yeats’s acknowledgements of Lady Gregory’s contributions to his work as flattery and overstatement, or roundly deplored such collaborative influence as they were prepared to admit” (*OK*, 206).

Ireland desired its public figures to be men, but its stage symbols to be women. As has been discussed in previous chapters, the performance of national identity was not restricted to the stage and the junction of political spin, personal egos and nationalist sentiment is what makes this play so important for an analysis of the evolution of Ireland’s national identity. Though Yeats’s dream initiated the play’s construction, Lady Gregory’s plot and language and Maud Gonne’s striking portrayal prompted the play’s ultimate success and enduring accomplishment. This combination of creative efforts and the mingling of the three individuals’ personal and political needs are the reason behind the play’s power. Though the conscious effort was probably to eliminate one aspect of

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controversy over the “real” author, i.e., what stand critics have taken from the date of first performance to current criticism with regards to how much collaboration actually occurred.

Irish life, the colonizing force of the English, and supplant it with something then seen to be more authentically “Irish,” a resurrection of an iconic mythological Celtic Queen, what can be seen lurking beneath the surface nationalism is a necessary and powerful blending of identities.

What can be palpably felt in a careful examination of the play is the plurality of voices speaking through it. The resulting oddities in gender and identity construction in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* predict the slipperiness of Irish national identity in the following decades. The combination of artistic voices yielded a more acceptable version of the message Yeats tried to communicate through *The Countess Cathleen*. The new image of Irish identity would not be a single, totalizing, mimetic representation, but rather would be a constantly shifting and evolving, elusive but inclusive collage of different personal characteristics. Ireland didn’t simply need a new icon to replace the old. Instead, it needed to accept its multiplicity *as* its unifying identity.

### **A New Artistic Venue**

In many ways, the play marked a new beginning for those involved with its creation. According to R.F. Foster, 1901 meant a return to drama for Yeats, after some time away prompted by the *Countess* debacle. Yeats’s energies and attentions were divided between the promotion of the new Irish Literary Theatre and the continued wooing of Maud Gonne.<sup>85</sup> Prior to this period he was torn between London’s literary life and Dublin’s political turmoil, but (in part due to Gonne’s involvement with

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<sup>85</sup> R. F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 257; hereafter cited as *YL*.

Inghinidhe na hEireann<sup>86</sup>) by 1901 he had settled his personal attentions on Dublin and professional efforts on a play for the new theatre's upcoming season. The working title for this play was "The Poor Old Woman," and its performance would cement Yeats's position in Irish theatrical-political history, as well as provide a dominant and enduring prototype of Irish martyrdom and nationalist fervor. From the start, though, the theatre and this play were marked by contradictions wrought by multiple forces needing to imprint the work with their own sense of Irishness. Up to this point Yeats had concerned himself personally with the lives of the aristocratic elite, and artistically with experimental, highly symbolic work. *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, though, would require something beyond the symbolism to which Yeats was dedicated. The recent failure of *The Countess Cathleen* was still fresh in his mind. Later:

in his 1908 preface to *The Unicorn from the Stars* he acknowledged this more specifically, writing that [Lady Gregory's] skill in representing "the country mind and the country speech" had been essential in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* to counter his own tendency to "symbolize rather than to represent life." (OK, 211)

Due to Lady Gregory's association with this work, the play was able to foreground a number of mythological and historical references, as well as the experience of the western Irish peasant. More importantly, though, the play was able to traverse the gap between the artist Yeats's highly obscure symbolism and the people's thirst for mimesis. The result was a total far greater than the sum of its parts, i.e., a nationalist play that the various permutations of Irish individuals could all claim as their own.

Furthermore, beyond artistic considerations, personal desires and influences affected the play. Though Yeats's effort at national theatre was at least in part motivated

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<sup>86</sup> Despite the fact that Foster (and other sources) use the Gaelic Inghinidhe na hEireann, all further references in this research will be translated into English, roughly "the Daughters of Erin."

by his desire to become romantically involved with Maud Gonne, “Gregory’s influence in the play was to prove instrumental in partially estranging Yeats and Gonne.”<sup>87</sup>

Gregory’s emotional attachment to her young protégé must have affected her focus on the events depicted on stage. Elizabeth Coxhead recounts that despite the fact that Gregory’s journal claims that she wrote “all but all” of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, when pressed by her family to take credit for authorship, she replied that “she could not take from [Yeats] any part of what had proved, after all, his one real popular success.”<sup>88</sup> Lady Gregory’s motivation to work closely with Yeats was mirrored by Yeats’s motivation to work at a further distance from any violent nationalist action. Despite Yeats’s self-proclaimed investment in political activism and the powerful nationalist message the drama itself portrays, the work on the play actually served to distance Yeats from any immediate involvement in the revolution. Yeats was a man of letters and not a man of battle. As Henry Merritt puts it, the play served to move Yeats “from sexuality to textuality,” and certainly also from physicality to a performance of intellectuality (*DMT*, 646).

Yeats and Gregory, as they grappled with their own identities and their relationship to each other and the Irish political world, are the most obvious forces affecting this play. They are not, however, the sole forces. Political pressures from both unionist and nationalist groups (each with a substantial investment in a new definition of Irishness), the financial pressures of running a theatre whose mission statement

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<sup>87</sup> Henry Merritt, “‘Dead Many Times’: *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats, Two Old Woman, and a Vampire,” *Modern Language Review* 96 (July 2001), 646; hereafter cited as *DMT*.

<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Coxhead, *Lady Gregory: A Literary Portrait* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 68.



specifically denounced popular productions intended solely for entertainment, and political power groups with specific agendas with regards to the performance of Irishness all left their mark. The issue of the performance of gender, specifically of Irish femininity, was of great interest to the Daughters of Erin, and more specifically to Maud Gonne, whose involvement in the production went beyond her tendentious relationship with Yeats. Gonne had previously refused to perform on stage in Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, but the Daughters of Erin was an organization focused on Irish nationalism, and more specifically on the depiction of Irish peasant women on the stage. Since women were heavily represented in this play's production, be it in the form of author, muse, performer, or the embodiment of symbolic ideals, the Daughters of Erin, with Gonne at their lead, were intent on possessing at least part of the control.

It was the Daughters of Erin who sponsored the first production of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, thus offering one more powerful identity base to define and please. Gonne acted in the lead role of the Old Woman during the first production, and a number of other actresses were drawn from the ranks of the "Daughters." During the first performances of the play, the organization's banner was prominently displayed near the stage.<sup>89</sup> The production's exhibition of this banner firmly connected *Cathleen* to this controversial political group, a group whose motivation for forming was to protest women's exclusion from other major revolutionary organizations. From the collaboration of authorship made by Yeats and Gregory, *Cathleen* moved to a

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<sup>89</sup> Marie Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years* (Dublin: Duffy, 1955), 17.

collaboration of performance. Even after it was put into print, the authors' voices were not the only ones to be heard.

In essence, the diffused and multi-faceted nature of the experience of production and performance were far from limited to the involvement of the ubiquitous W.B. Yeats. The play and the theatre that produced it faced many compromises as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* progressed from conception to production. Even what seemed to be the bedrock metaphor of *Cathleen* – Irish nationalism – was subject to complication and compromise. Though the mandate of the Irish Literary Theatre promoted Irish plays by Irish playwrights to be performed by Irish actors, Yeats, either by desire or by necessity, was quick to bend the rules. According to “A Calendar for the Production and Reception of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*” by Antony Coleman, Yeats, upon his return to Dublin, immediately set upon bringing the Fay brothers over from London into the production company, and continued his pursuit of Annie Horniman, a staunch supporter of the crown, to provide funding. Even Maud Gonne, despite her extreme political activism was, as a daughter of a colonel in the British army, at best a controversial choice for the position of lead in the play.<sup>90</sup> In the process of creating a national identity, it seems, Yeats and the national theatre company felt they could afford to fudge on actual national origins or political alliances if the end justified the means, and if at least on stage (be it in the theatre or in the press) everyone played their properly proscribed roles.

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<sup>90</sup> Antony Coleman, “A Calendar for the Production and Reception of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*,” *Modern Drama* 18 (1975), 127; hereafter cited as *CPR*.

This willingness to transgress borders in the creation of a “national” play was mirrored in Yeats’s willingness to transgress his traditional role within the theatre. Again, personal, public and national identities in Ireland were and would continue to be slippery and amorphous. Yeats had worked to establish himself as a recognized poet, the voice of an emerging nation speaking about a created nostalgic history in affected and romantic verse.<sup>91</sup> But his interest, now in the theatre, offered him the opportunity to try on different masks,<sup>92</sup> to branch out beyond the role of the statesman/artist to the physical, actual role of the actor. In a letter to Gregory he writes:

I am going to surprise you by an idea that has been in my head lately . . . I have an idea of going on the stage . . . that I may master the stage for purposes of poetical drama . . . Does the idea seem to you very wild? . . . I would not of course go on in my own name & I would tell people exactly why I did the thing at all. I believe that I construct all right – with wild confusions which I get out of – but I have a very little sense of acting. (*YL*, 259)

For Yeats, the nation itself was a theatre, and he consistently performed his role as artist and politician, as Great Man of the Nation, through his non-fiction pieces, his letters to the editor of popular newspapers and magazines, his appearance in positions of authority in countless organizations (including those of an occult foundation) and his well-timed and highly choreographed public appearances. His opinions changed as he felt the need for his public role to change, based on the political climate, the needs of his career, and his interest in wooing various political woman (most famously, Maud Gonne). As a result of his fluctuating perception of the nation and his world, then, the next natural step

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<sup>91</sup> Yeats’s penchant for affectation was notorious and is dubiously outlined in his numerous biographies (several of which are cited above). His affectation, his preference for elaborate and highly symbolic speech, marks a clear departure from Lady Gregory’s simple stage realism and Kiltartan dialectic style. The contrast between these two styles and their effect on the composition of the play are what combine to create the multi-faceted depiction of Irish identity that the play offers.

<sup>92</sup> For further description of Yeats’s interest in masks, see his “Anima Hominis” in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, which can be found in his collection *Mythologies* (New York: Collier, 1969), 325-42.

would be to leave the metaphorical stage of his public career and to step onto the physical stage to take on the one role he'd yet to attempt – the role of his not-self. Yeats's individual personality acts as a highly symbolic reflection of that of his nation. The boundaries between versions of identity were always permeable, costumes or masks to be donned at advantageous times.<sup>93</sup>

Thus for Yeats, and for the Ireland he represented, identity was not something natural or historic – something to recover like an archeologist might recover an artifact – and not something one might verify with an appeal to a single, all-authoritative arbiter. Identity was a performance to be received, interpreted and evaluated by others in order to be validated.<sup>94</sup> Yeats insisted that he would explain his choice to act on stage, to “tell people exactly why [he] did the thing at all,” indicating his recognition of himself as a public figure whose actions required an explanation. Ultimately he needed the approval of others, and specifically of key women in his life, to make the types of decisions that would determine who he felt himself to be. Gregory's approval, as pseudo-mother, muse and benefactor, would have been essential to the process of birthing new identities, for as much as he understood himself as performing on the public stage, those closest to him acted as his key critics for who he was in private, and Gregory's support, protection and guidance had been unwavering throughout their relationship.

His reliance on Gregory offered all the more reason to trust her as partner in the composition of the play. As Pethica states, “Yeats confided privately to Lennox

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<sup>93</sup> Kiberd discusses this at length in his chapters entitled “Inventing Irelands” and “Revolt Into Style – Yeatsian poetics” (*II*, 286-315).

<sup>94</sup> For similar arguments concerning the production of Irish national identity at the turn of the century, see Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002) and Vincent John Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2004).

Robinson ‘more than once’ that Lady Gregory’s share in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was so great that ‘the authorship of the play should be ascribed to her’” (OK, 219). At the time of *Cathleen*’s composition, Yeats was growing more and more able to recognize Gregory’s importance as a solid and well-prepared support system. His earlier attempt at a national drama, one that could be accepted as both art and political propaganda, had been almost universally rejected. Drama was still a fledgling endeavor for him, and *The Countess Cathleen* had at best confused his viewers, and at worst moved them to anger and public objection. By 1901 he had committed himself to continuing to pursue his political nationalism through the theatre, but clearly he needed help. He’d already made a career of leaning upon Gregory (and a number of other strong women) for financial and artistic support, and with *Cathleen* that support was even more necessary. “In *Cathleen ni Houlihan* . . . symbolic and naturalistic levels of meaning [would] complement and intensify one another, achieving the ‘mix’ Yeats had sought in which poetic is integrated with realistic ‘without ceasing to be itself’” (OK, 214). The nation needed a composite portrait, and Yeats needed a public success.

At this point in his career Yeats was highly sensitive to his own needs as an artist, but somewhat baffled by what an audience might desire. In constructing a national drama, though, the audience *had* to be considered. For Yeats, this alteration required a difficult augmentation of his usual creative process. Again, this need for flexibility was all the more reason to solicit Gregory’s help. He admitted that “one must get one’s actors, and perhaps one’s scenery, from the theatre of commerce,”<sup>95</sup> but Yeats

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<sup>95</sup> W.B. Yeats, “The Theatre,” *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 170.

abhorred any theatre that appeared overtly commercial. And despite his need to consider issues of commercial success, the mission statement of the Irish Literary Theatre, a document for which he was primarily responsible, specifically directed the body to focus not on material gain, but rather on a pedagogical effort to instruct the audience on what it meant to be revolutionary, and what it meant to be Irish.<sup>96</sup> Again, this contradiction between his and his theatre's needs and desires prompted a number of compromises, as well as an essential collaboration with others.

He could rely on the Fay brothers to provide him with the actors, but Gregory was needed to assist him with the scenery. As Susan Harris writes, *Cathleen* "shows that nationalist sentiment had become closely identified with certain dramatic conventions, and that in order to speak to his target audience Yeats was willing to adopt and adapt some of them."<sup>97</sup> But he needed Gregory's help to find those conventions and implement them. Lore surrounding the play, as well as letters written between Yeats and Gregory, indicate that the idea for *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was generated by a dream Yeats had. He described the dream as follows:

One night I had a dream almost distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and talk of a marriage, and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Cathleen ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> A portion of this manifesto has been quoted in a previous chapter, and can be found in its entirety in Lady Gregory's *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (London: Classic Books, 1913).

<sup>97</sup> Susan C. Harris, "Blow the Witches Out: Gender Construction and the Subversion of Nationalism in Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *On Baile's Strand*," *Modern Drama* 39 (1996), 477; hereafter cited as *BWO*.

<sup>98</sup> From *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. By Russell K Alspach, (London: Macmillan, 1966), 214.

The initial context for the play, as well as the device for personifying Ireland, are both outlined in this letter. Yet in this rudimentary stage a great deal of the total theatrical production is missing, elements that are considered to lend authority to its presentation and reason for its receipt of public approval.

Yeats looked to Gregory to help develop the idea only dimly reflected in this dream into a workable, stage-able play. Both the melodrama of the play's construction and the mythology upon which the main characters rely were much more Gregory's forte. Gregory's "greater sympathy for and dramatic sense of peasant life" led the two writers to conclude that "after discussing Yeats's scenario . . . she alone should draft the cottage scene . . . and that only then would Yeats become directly involved" (*OK*, 212). The result is that there are very different styles forced to share one space on the stage. In the drama, as opposed to Yeats's dream, two Cathleens are displayed to the audience. There is the 'Poor Old Woman,' probably a representation of the fabled Cailleach Bhearra,<sup>99</sup> who served as the inspiration for the working title, and the beautiful, young, queenly girl, the more traditional form of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Two writers, an actress, a host of peripheral theatrical staff and the audience would all work together to "create" this national icon, a woman who could adopt multiple identities in the service of representing her nation.

On stage the two versions of the national heroine are combined, the form of the old woman encapsulating the power of the young and beautiful queen. Such a

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<sup>99</sup> For a thorough description of Cailleach Bhearra and other important figures in Irish folklore, see *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*, eds. W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory (New York: Avenel, 1986).

combination would have had an obvious symbolic meaning for Yeats, a manifestation of the mother-love he found in Gregory and his passion for the muse he found in Maud Gonne. Once again, the similarity between the process of mounting a personal identity and the collective evolution of that of a nation becomes apparent in the mythological and artistic configurations of Cathleen. Both the old woman and the young queen are forms recognizable as separate and separately important figures in Yeats's life, as well as in western peasant folklore (*DMT*, 644). Yet it would have been Gregory, rather than Yeats, who recognized that the two physical and mythological characters could be incorporated into one. Because of her extensive experience with peasant folklore, and due to her own personal involvement with Yeats, Gregory would also have understood the importance of ideologically splitting the two female forms, giving the audience the Old Woman in the cottage and a hint of the young and beautiful queen outside.<sup>100</sup> The core idea for *Cathleen* sprung from Yeats's subconscious, but the form, format, and a great deal of the mythological content were developed by the folklore-aware and world-aware Gregory.

The play marks, as Merritt writes, something new in that in "Cathleen's portrayal there is a departure from earlier depictions and [this play was intended] to establish the 'definitive Cathleen'" (*DMT*, 644). This definitive Cathleen, however, would not be the solitary figure in Yeats's dream, but rather the far more complex and faceted figure of the Old Woman/young Queen, a character whose identity shifts within

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<sup>100</sup> Subsequent productions of the play include stage directions that instruct the actress playing Cathleen to remove her cloak before exiting the stage – thus exposing her transformation into the young and beautiful Queen to the audience. The original production, however, did not, and Maud Gonne only appeared on stage in the Old Woman persona.



the action of the play, allowing the symbolic meaning she represents to shift as well. Rather than pave over differences between the figures on stage or in the audience, Yeats and Gregory offer the audience a symbol that unites difference, a woman who gains her power from her impossible inherent contradictions. It is oddly appropriate that the new, definitive Cathleen would not only stem from a dream, an unconscious fantasy of a man deeply conflicted about his own national and sexual identity and his place within Irish public society, but that the result of that dream would be an amalgamation of Cathleens and of artistic forces, uniting the various forms of Irish identity and insecurity so passionately seeking a symbol to represent themselves. History would prove that Irish national identity could not and would not be accomplished through nostalgic mythological references alone, and would continue to elude a single, simplified definition. Instead, a slippery combination of shifting voices and gender constructions would continue to this day to define what it was to be an Irish symbol, nationalist and revolutionary.

It would not, however, be easy to establish this multiplicity as the natural foundation for the emerging national identity. For Yeats, forming a national identity would have meant forming *around* a particular cult of personality – one most likely led by him in whatever form he chose to appear at that particular moment – and this frustrated desire for a single, unifying leader was not limited to him. Irish popular history has repeatedly endeavored to trace a lineage of “true Irish Kings,” beneath the reign of which all of Ireland was, until the Norman invasions, united. As Donnchadh O Corrain has shown, however, this united Ireland is much more mythology than physical

history,<sup>101</sup> and this desire to amalgamate under a single personality, to form a cohesive nation around a consistent chronicle with a single heroic father to lead, both dominated and frustrated Irish politics and art.<sup>102</sup> The revolutionary front had not yet produced a satisfactory replacement, and the resulting discouragement demanded a new solution to an old problem.

In 1900 Yeats wrote his essay “The Theatre” in which he asserts his belief that true artistic drama – drama intended to teach rather than merely to entertain – must be heavily influenced by the Greek tragedies. By drawing on a revered and honored past, Yeats hoped to characterize “the noble moment, the great moment, when the actor must speak thinking lyrically and musically.”<sup>103</sup> That lyrical moment would recapture the living glory of a spirit shrouded, but not destroyed, by colonial intervention. Nevertheless, “he was coming to realize that his evolving conception of personality and poetic drama would necessarily result in an increasingly unpopular form of theatre” (YPC, 83). The conflict between his own needs (his need to be in Maud Gonne’s life, and his need to be a Great Man of politics and art) and the mechanics of achieving those needs (accumulating a following substantial enough to finance his productions, as well as gain for him the political support necessary to continue his work) mirrored those of the audience he endeavored to reach. He and they wanted to possess an Irish theatre that would demonstrate their separation from England in a way that relied upon an authenticity traced back to a single source, a unified origin, an obvious and proud father

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<sup>101</sup> *The Oxford History of Ireland*, ed. R.F. Foster (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).

<sup>102</sup> A famous and timely example of the thwarted national figurehead was Charles Stewart Parnell, who had been discredited only a decade before the production of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

<sup>103</sup> David Richman, “Yeats, Personality, and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*,” *New England Theatre Journal* 5 (1994), 82; hereafter cited as YPC.

or king – but to do so they had to manufacture that authenticity from an amalgamation of material and ideas stemming from Ireland’s very disparate people.

In other words Yeats needed, like his audience needed, to give up the idea of a single, clear, identifying icon that would encapsulate Irish identity. There was no single image that could be reflected back to the audience that would present exactly who they believed they were, because their beliefs produced too many, too different images. Irish identity might be expressed by the lyric, but it would also be expressed by the character, and personal characters always elude concrete forms. The real solution to the problem of Irish national identity would need to move beyond a Greek city-state’s production of symbolic individuality. Irish identity would have to incorporate different conceptions of national origin, religion, and gender to form a composite or a collaborative construction.

As has been stated above, the personal and professional relationships of the key players in this drama can serve as a microcosm of the complex political landscape that had to be negotiated, if the play was to be a success. Gregory was in a unique position to understand this necessary complexity, as is evidenced by her complicated relationship with Yeats. Widowed at the age of 40, she was forced to perform the identity of a de-sexualized old woman, but her reality was far from her recital. Though she was older than Yeats and tended to relate to the poet much as his own mother might have (if his own mother had had the economic means and the personal strength to do so),<sup>104</sup> Yeats and Gregory’s relationship could have been very different.

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<sup>104</sup> Yeats’s relationship with his own mother and with Lady Gregory is well documented in a number of biographies, and in his own *Autobiographies*. For a thorough and modern discussion of both these relationships, though, *YL* is a definitive text. For another perspective on Yeats’s complicated relationship to the women in his life, see *Yeats’s Ghosts: The Secret Life of W.B. Yeats* by Brenda Maddox. (New

Her own husband had been thirty five years her senior, so a difference in age (though usually reversed in terms of gender) was not unheard of; however, the customs of the time dictated that Gregory's influence on Yeats take a platonic and paternally affectionate form. She saw to it that Yeats had proper clothing, food, and furnishings for his Woburn Buildings apartment, and she frequently gave him advice on personal matters. Hence, she understood the repressive nature of a socially agreed upon and imposed identity even while she easily traversed the boundary between *his* private and his public selves. She made no secret of her negative opinion of Maud Gonne as a prospective lover, and compared Annie Horniman (another older woman and widow who often vied for Yeats's attention) to "a shilling lying at the bottom of a tub of electrified water, with everyone trying to scoop it out" (*YL*, 258).

Just as the nation would benefit from combination, Gregory, confined to her role as motherly figure to the charismatic Yeats because of her age and gender, her position as a wealthy widow, and/or her attention to propriety and to public image, had a great deal to gain in taking control of the play and of combining the image of the Old Woman with that of the young and beautiful, sexually desirable Cathleen. The result would be a "fusion of mother figure and sweetheart" (*DMT*, 644). If her affection for Yeats would never be romantic off the stage, she could at least arrange for a metaphorical union on the stage of the soon-to-be Abbey theatre. By constructing a Cathleen that could be both "mother figure and sweetheart," she wrote herself into the role of romantic heroine to

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York: Harper Collins, 1999). For a comprehensive depiction of Lady Gregory's relationship with W.B. Yeats, see her *Seventy Years: Being an Autobiography of Lady Gregory* (New York: Macmillan, 1976) and *Lady Gregory's Journals: The Coole Edition*, ed. Lennox Robinson (London: Smythe, 1987).

Yeats's lead. In addition, she kept her artistic protégé closer to her than to anyone else, including Maud Gonne (who would have, in this extended metaphor, naturally taken the position of the young sweetheart.) With Gonne removed, so was the volatile and distracting influence on Yeats, and on Ireland. Mother replaced lover, and safety replaced danger.<sup>105</sup>

Symbolically, then, Gregory could accomplish the merging of a symbolic identity with a body that would otherwise deny her that role. Such a successful combination would also open the door to other icons or symbols that would eventually be understood as uniquely Irish because of their state of fusion. Rather than trying to establish Ireland's authenticity through some archeological resurrection of old emblems, the new Irish identity could be characterized by the new meanings such combinations could deliver. In other words, the collaborators as separate personalities encompass a level of multiplicity that cannot be accomplished with signifiers linked to singular meanings. The same can be said for the new constructions of national identity on the stage of an Irish national theatre. Too much was at stake to leave anyone out in the cold. To encompass all the necessary identity facets, a complex mycelium of gender, religion and politics had to be achieved.

A successful play would have also offered Gregory access to a public and an authority that she alone could not command.<sup>106</sup> Yeats could demand the attention and

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<sup>105</sup> The ramifications of this can be seen in the sexual politics in Ireland at this time. Love for one's nation became conflated with love for one's mother, and thus the depiction of women as sexually pure became a trope not just expected but demanded. See, for instance, the riots resulting from the Abbey Theatre's production of *Playboy of the Western World* which are discussed in a later chapter.

<sup>106</sup> Despite the similarities in tone and construction between *The Gaol Gate* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, for instance, only *Cathleen* became and stayed nationally famous, while *The Gaol Gate* has only recently

artistic respect that Gregory's gender and social position denied her, and thus she would have found it necessary to marry her knowledge and authorial endeavors to his name and public persona. Her position with regards to the authorship of the play, as well as her position with regards to her relationship to Yeats, added yet another element to the play's complex meaning. In addition to its more overt nationalist agenda, Gregory's anonymous authorship echoes a prevalent nationalist theme of private sacrifice for a greater public good. "Although Gregory seems to have harboured resentment about Yeats's appropriation of virtually all credit for the play, she publicly acquiesced in it" (*DMT*, 645). Gregory had more at stake than a metaphorical love affair with a hypothetical Yeats. She had her relationship to her art, and to her (unknowing) public, to negotiate. At the same time that she blended disparate gender identities within the play, she also integrated an important theme that was missing from Yeats's initial dream, the implied transaction – love for blood – that results from the Michael's leaving his fiancé for the Old Woman, and for Ireland – a sacrifice not unlike an author leaving her name off her work, sending her intellectual child away, so to speak, for the good of the country. It was assumed that the play would be better received, would be more powerful and more effective for its intended purpose, if Yeats was considered the author. Gregory, then, traded her blood for her country, her intellectual property for a nationalist agenda.

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been resurrected by recently published anthologies. Yeats's flare for the off-stage dramatic, his carefully constructed flamboyant and inflammatory public persona, gave the play the attention it required, while her skill gave the production the accessibility it needed.

### ***Cathleen Comes to the Stage***

The play itself is simple in structure. A one act play, it is performed entirely within the household of the Gillanes, a moderately prosperous peasant family living in a “cottage close to Killala” (*CH*, 83).<sup>107</sup> Killala is a seaside village in north Mayo, noted for its part in the 1798 rebellion. French forces docked there before joining the Irish in an effort to fight the British yeomen. Peter and Bridget, the patriarch and matriarch of the Gillane family, are preparing for their son Michael’s impending marriage. Delia Cahel, Michael’s betrothed, is expected to bring happiness to the family in two very different forms – romantic (i.e., domestic pleasure for Michael) and economic (in the form of a hefty dowry for the Gillane family). In addition, tangential remarks indicate that the marriage will allow the family a level of respectability that the Gillanes have yet to fully enjoy. Thus the marriage is desirable for a number of different reasons and for all characters involved, and is displayed to the audience as something valuable, something to be pursued. Yet the first sounds the audience actually hear are not comments regarding this anticipated event, but rather cheers from afar, and Peter’s response to those cheers. Peter cannot understand the sounds, and imagines that it “might be a hurling,” making reference to what would be cheers in response to an Irish sport popular at the time (*CH*, 83). Instinctively, Patrick, Michael’s younger brother and a figure who would represent the next wave of the Irish resistance to the British, knows that his father

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<sup>107</sup> All references to the play will be taken from the 1902 version as it is published in the variorum edition, cited above; here and after the play will be cited as *CH*.

cannot be correct. This day in 1798 is not a day for games. Instead, it is the day that the French have landed to aid the Irish in their uprising.<sup>108</sup>

Bridget, like her husband, is not concerned with the cheers outside and directs her youngest son's attention back to the home, to the domestic event about to occur. She suggests that Peter examine the excellent quality of Michael's wedding clothes. These clothes, tangible examples of the family's acquired wealth, lead Peter and Bridget to reflect on how they've been able to expand their family's prosperity, despite the hardships they have faced. Thus, in the opening exchange, Gregory<sup>109</sup> is able to set up one of the central dilemmas in Irish theatre and Irish national drama – the tension between the essential political struggle outside the home and that of a family dynamic geared toward success, or even survival. A nation and a national struggle is composed of both heroes and martyrs, icons of the struggle, but also countless numbers of individuals, real and important, all with their own personal, as well as national lives to lead.

In 1892 Douglas Hyde, co-founder and President of the Gaelic League, made a speech entitled "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland." In that speech he intimates that a real revolution against the English would be a type of homecoming – that the fashion in which the "Irish" of the day lived was akin to that of a visitor in their own

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<sup>108</sup> For a concise discussion of the 1798 uprising, see R.F. Foster's article entitled "Ascendancy and Union" in *The Oxford History of Ireland*, Ed. R.F. Foster (New York: Oxford, 1989), 134-173.

<sup>109</sup> As has been stated above, correctly attributing authorship of this play is difficult because how much collaboration actually took place, and where that collaboration occurred, is very much still in question. However, *OK* is very convincing in its argument that Lady Gregory is responsible for the bulk of the action and dialogue and that Yeats was primarily responsible for the verses recited by the Old Woman (though Pethica does offer evidence that Lady Gregory had some say in the construction of the Old Woman, as well). For this purpose, and to foreground the issue of collaboration, I use Lady Gregory's name when referring to the author of the dialogue, and Yeats's name when referring to the author of the Old Woman's verses.



home, and a return to the authentic Irish “home” would mean the return of authentic (non-English) life.<sup>110</sup> This notion of the authentic Irish home was highly constructed, depending heavily upon folklore and nostalgia. As a result, one of the goals of *Cathleen* was not simply to blend this nostalgic *assumed* truth with something closer to actual revolutionary action, but instead to make the integration of reality into the Irish revolutionary consciousness not only possible, but desirable. In order to accomplish this goal, Gregory provides a dramatic background familiar and palatable to the audience, i.e., a simulated traditional western home, housing happy peasants enjoying their (seemingly untouched by the English) lifestyle.<sup>111</sup> Bridget and Peter’s conversation remarking on their success despite the hardships that most peasant families in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Ireland faced is interrupted, though, as the audience knows it must be, but not by the English; instead, their pleasant reverie is disrupted by their youngest son, and by the revolution that is brewing in the town below.

According to Susan Harris, due to the success of previously staged plays including J.D. Whitbread’s melodramas *Wolfe Tone* and *Lord Edward*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*’s audience could be expected to recognize the historical significance of the date in 1798 that Gregory selected, and of the cheering in the square (*BWO*, 478). But rather than receive the revolutionary call, the audience instead views a family persistently focusing not outward but inward, intent on bettering their own personal

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<sup>110</sup> For a further discussion and analysis of this speech, see Klaus Lubbers, “Literature and National Identity: The Irish Example,” *Nationalism in Literature: Literature, Language and National Identity* (New York: Verlag, 1989), 269-79.

<sup>111</sup> Jean Baudrillard, in a number of works, explores the desire for cultural images that replace reality. Based on a desire for “the charm and illusion of appearances,” the “signs themselves [become] more important than the emergence of any truth,” in *Seduction*, Trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1990), 53.

lives. Patrick, the youngest and (for now) least important son is the first and only Gillane to notice the old lady walking past their home. Gregory turns to an archetypal reference familiar to her audience, but complicates that reference in its on-stage presentation. Her purpose was to remind the audience that icons were meant to be as malleable and evolutionary as their spirits were to be revolutionary, and that deciding upon concrete and finalized forms for themselves and the nation was akin to resigning themselves to British servitude.

The fact that she locates this revolutionary theme in the body of an Old Woman who will later transmute into the figure of a young Queen is especially illustrative. As Diane Bessai writes in “Who Was Cathleen ni Houlihan?” the use of a female figure to denote the symbol of the nation is not unique to Irish culture, but certainly frequently used by it. There is a “peculiar relation of the Irish patriot to his country in which the personification has been much more a living reality than merely a literary figure.”<sup>112</sup> The Irish people have to be ready to receive the message if the revolution is to succeed. To turn away their country would be akin to turning away their own mother. Yet though the living embodiment of a constantly evolving Ireland approaches the Gillane household, Gregory uses the Old Woman’s approach to both underscore and subvert the audience’s expectations. Revolution cannot be about comfort or probability. Instead, it must be about change. “By the time . . . Cathleen [is put] on stage . . . melodramatic convention has primed the Dublin play going audience to expect to see Ireland represented as the virtuous, chaste, faithful heroine of melodrama” (*BWO*, 479). Yet the

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<sup>112</sup> George-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion*, (Hatboro: Four Courts P, 2002), 54.

virtuous bride-to-be, Delia Cahel, doesn't appear until the final moments of the play, and only then to be devastated by the loss of her betrothed to the Poor Old Woman. Too, the Cathleen promised by the title of the play never actually appears to the audience, but is only spied off stage by Patrick once Michael has made his blood sacrifice. The Ireland Gregory shows her audience is woman in her most complex form – the aged, weary, wise old woman who has faced hardship but survived. She is the ultimate composite, the sum total of her life experiences.

This strategy of presenting and then complicating familiar melodramatic techniques continues throughout the play. Not interested in his parents' conversation or his older brother's wedding attire, Patrick remains at the window and is the one to comment on the Old Woman's approach. Thus, the expected trope represented by the "song tradition [where] . . . the patriot-poet presents himself as adoring unrequited lover of a beautiful divinely-endowed mistress" is disrupted in several different ways.<sup>113</sup> Patrick is not Michael – he is too young to devote himself to the cause; Ireland is not a beautiful or young (and thus marriageable) mistress; and no one of particular importance seems to notice her arrival. If Ireland is to be ready for the revolution, it must dispose of its preconceived notions of how a hero or a national icon might appear. The imagination should remain unfettered and the theme of Irish identity should be creativity and acceptance. Patrick's parents, still concerned first with their own domestic drama, think that perhaps the Old Woman is a neighbor who is interested in the details of Michael's

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<sup>113</sup> Diane Bessai, "Who Was Cathleen ni Houlihan?" *The Malahat Review* 42 (1977), 115; hereafter cited as WWC.

upcoming nuptials. They are wholly unprepared to accept the fact that their nation might appear on their doorstep in such an unlikely form.

Patrick, though, instinctively more attuned to the symbolic and supernatural nature of the woman's presence, asks "Do you remember what Winny of the Cross Roads was saying the other night about the strange woman that goes through the country whatever time there's war or trouble coming?" (*CH*, 84). His comment here is important for two reasons. First, despite the fact that the day should be one of celebration – the wedding is less than 24 hours away and is accepted by all to be a highly beneficial match for the family, Patrick realizes that there is "trouble coming." Even the sounds of cheers and happy exclamations from the crowd outside the house lend themselves to a tone of celebration, but Patrick interprets the day conversely. The conflict is multi-layered. One aspect is that of the personal vs. political. What might lead to a victorious rebellion would, for individual families, lead to tragedy. There is also a conflict of ideology. The wedding is sure to be Christian and probably Catholic, but the "authentic" Ireland, the nostalgic mythology so often referenced by the artists of the time "seems to be symbolic of pagan Ireland, regretting the stricter regime of Christianity, and the changes that time [has] brought about" (*WWC*, 118). Second, Patrick's reference to the crossroads, a common symbol for dramatic change, indicates that his family and those around them are at a crossroads, that the old woman is that change's portent, but also that change and choice are relative. A crossroads is both a point of conflict and a point of conversion, a place where two paths diverge, but also where two paths come together. This tension, then, is what represents the real Irish experience – not the path but the strain of always

being pulled apart and pushed together by the conflict and convergence of personal and community motivations.

As the story progresses, the chasm grows between the younger and the older generation and their interpretation of their immediate and external environments. Though the people in the village are cheering about what they feel might be the beginning of the end of the “troubles” with England, the Gillanes are only interested in facilitating the impending marriage. Patrick is told to open the front door, not for the Old Woman who walks by the house, but instead for Michael, to ease his return to the domestic sphere he is about to make more secure through his marriage. Here, with the return of the oldest son, Gregory introduces one of the primary villains in Irish drama and Irish history: money. Michael’s father directly references Delia’s dowry, hoping that Michael “brought Delia’s fortune with him safe, for fear the people might go back on the bargain and [Peter] after making it. Trouble enough [Peter] had making it” (*CH*, 84). Troubles for the Gillane family mean internal, personal, financial troubles – troubles they feel should soon be at an end *if* the other family doesn’t go back on their bargain. The cheers in the village were from villagers welcoming the French forces because they hoped the French might help them remove the poverty-inducing tax burden of life under English rule, but Gregory is careful to separate out this idealism from the practicality of daily life. Even as the symbolic villagers unite around a common nationalist cause, Gregory shows the audience through the Gillanes that individuals involved in such a struggle might not be so quick to bond together. The myth of the

revolution and the day to day reality of trying to live with poverty, pictures clearly at odds with one another, were both essential to the composite portrait of the Irish nation.

The Catholic Church further complicates Gregory's quiet description of this family scene. Though the revolutionary forces are forming down in the city, the priest is at home, ready to receive Michael when he goes to visit. The priest is home so that he can give his blessing to the marriage, but in so doing he is removed from any revolutionary action, and also from the Gillane household. The Gillanes must come to him, while in contrast the "supernatural, phantasmal mother-figure who personifies Ireland" enters the Gillane home and asks for nothing but to tell her story.<sup>114</sup> Again, the tension between the two conflicting images provides the audience with the uniquely Irish portrait of the peasant family, and a portrait specific to Gregory's conception. In an open letter to Lady Gregory written in 1919, Yeats defined passion, that which drove his creative energy and motivated his characters and his poetry, as "the straining of one's being against some obstacle that obstructs its unity" (*YPC*, 91). The Old Woman "seems to be symbolic of pagan Ireland, regretting the stricter regime of Christianity, and the changes that time have brought about."<sup>115</sup> It is the Old Woman and her pagan<sup>116</sup> freedom from Christianity and the dividing influence of a dedication to a church that

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<sup>114</sup> Joseph Chadwick, "Family Romance as National Allegory in Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *The Dreaming of the Bones*," *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 32:2 (Summer 1986), 155.

<sup>115</sup> For a number of literary expressions of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, see *The Poem Book of the Gael*, ed. Eleanor Hull (New York: Kessinger, 2004).

<sup>116</sup> My use of the word "pagan" should be considered inclusive beyond that of the occultism Yeats's was practicing at that time. The *OED* defines "pagan" as "a person not subscribing to any major or recognized religion, esp. the dominant religion of a particular society." Therefore *Cathleen* was not revolutionary because she was once a symbol of some now-forgotten poly-theistic Druidism possibly indigenous to Ireland, but rather because she does not subscribe to *any* organized religion. She is entirely new and outside of the old forms, and thus suited to act as a locus for the unification of the audience's different identities.

actually crosses the threshold into the Gillane household. The Old Woman, through the tensely unifying space she embodies, is able to powerfully change the home, even while the priest hides far away from any private or public revolution.

Turning back from the symbolic, though, Gregory is careful to reinsert the more realistic aspects of revolution, as well as herself and style back into the text. As Pethica writes, the repeated “subordination of the supernatural to the peasant realism until the closing lines of the play reflects not merely Lady Gregory’s success in developing the realistic background Yeats had envisaged, but more significantly points to the influence of her experience as a folklore gatherer in determining the final form of the play” (*OK*, 215). The stylistic tension between the authors is what allows the play to so successfully foreground other inherent tensions in Irish identity, whether they be between the pagan and the Christian, the sexual and the familial, or the visceral and the philosophical.

After the reference to the priest, Peter again brings up the “fortune” which Michael has brought with him into the home. What might at first blush seem mercenary almost to the point of embarrassment is actually a careful reminder of the truly dire circumstances a western peasant family might face at this point in history. A successful marriage, an acquisition of a fortune, might mean the difference between starvation and prosperity for the entire extended family, not to mention an opportunity for the individual to purchase the good graces of the Church. Even a personal decision like marriage indicates the degree of interdependence among these communities. The decision of one would absolutely affect the family; the rebellion of some would without question affect the nation.

Peter's reference to his wife's lack of a substantial dowry inspires Bridget to respond:

Well, if I didn't bring much I didn't get much. What had you the day I married you but a flock of hens and you feeding them, and a few lambs and you driving them on the market at Ballina? . . . If I brought no fortune I worked it out in my bones, laying down the baby, Michael that is standing there now, on a stook of straw, while I dug the potatoes, and never asking big dresses or anything but to be working. (*CH*, 85)

The audience bears witness here to how the condition and nature of marriage is influenced by the political and economic nature of the environment. The private must be public, because in an economy of necessity, emotions are a luxury. Bridget and Peter's currency, the value that located them within their society and in their relationship to one another, was their love and their mutual labor. This currency of labor and love, though, in a single generation, has changed from what it once was to hard currency, gold used to buy and sell land and goods from the colonial British who now claim ownership. After Peter claims that Bridget is the "best woman in Ireland," he immediately follows with "but money is good too" (*CH*, 85). His interests have moved from his affection for his wife and family, beyond the love a man might show by securing his family's survival, to fondling the money, dreaming of something far beyond financial security or fortitude. He now aspires to prosperity. He removes his hand from his wife's arm and "begins handling the money again" (*CH*, 85). It is clear where his affections and his attentions lie, and even on the day before his son's marriage, he doesn't think about their romantic or personal familial future together, but instead dreams of what the "family" will do with the money. In other words, Peter imagines how he will increase his wealth and his family's stature within the community rather than how he will interact with and mutually



assist the community. He ignores that part of his identity that should want to unite with his emerging nation, and instead opts for insular individuality.

Gregory's extended domestic scene is remarkable for a number of reasons, especially for the layered quality of the identity structures it displays. Set against the backdrop of the 1798 uprising, the specter of national rebellion and social upheaval lurks just beyond the confines of this domestic space. Periodically throughout the play, the audience hears the shouts and cheers from the city that herald the arrival of the French. Also, however, the audience bears witness to how the family and the individual develop either their group or their singular identities, one to the exclusion of the other, in this unique environment. Peter and Bridget have moved from what would have been a standard romantic trope – the starving peasant family bound together by honor and love for one another – to a family poised on the brink of success. Their children are alive and healthy, but more importantly, are increasing the family's *financial* worth. In addition, Peter and Bridget have changed, have been forced to redirect their energies from their family and their church to their own financial success, and have left the younger generation to worry about self and nation. Peter asks Michael if Delia wanted any of the money from the dowry for her own use, and Michael responds that "She did not, indeed. She did not seem to take much notice of it, or to look at it at all" (*CH*, 85). Delia (and one can assume, Michael) are much the reflection of what Michael's parents once were – idealistic figures focused on their own domestic happiness, the beginning of their own personal lives together, but without the intervention of Cathleen they are destined to

become his parents, mercenary and insular. The landscape of Irish identity in this part of Ireland and at this time in history makes an alternative almost impossible.

Gregory demonstrates that in the Ireland of that time, simultaneously having a personal, a familial and a national identity is impossible because the needs of one always supplant those of the other. Bridget reflects back on the idealized notion of romantic love, claiming that Delia would have no need of money when faced with the notion of marrying a man such as her son. She claims “It is proud she must be to get you; a good steady boy that will make use of the money, and not be running through it or spending it on drink like another” (*CH*, 86). The irony in this comment is twofold. First, Bridget has implied that good women, women who have reached the level of success she, herself, has reached, would not need or desire money. Yet just previously she complained to her husband that he had no money when they married, despite the fact that Peter proclaimed her the “finest woman in Ireland.” As Harris writes, “the polar opposition” between the romantic ideal and the stark reality “dramatizes the impossibility . . . of both serving Ireland and remaining in the land of the living” (*BWO*, 480). An Irish individual was good only if he or she could fit into the nostalgic depiction of a romantic (i.e. starving) peasant, yet at the same time, real issues of personal survival, and ultimately personal success, made the achievement of that ideal impossible.

In addition, Bridget claims that Delia is lucky to have a husband who will use the money wisely, but the parents seem to give little notice to the notion that the children might make use of the money at all. The fathers of the betrothed negotiated the deal, and

Peter has already laid plans for how the money is to be spent. This money, meant to provide a foundation for the couple's future, is something upon which the entire family depends. It isn't just the British who profit from the currency of Irish peasant bodies, both male and female, it's an economy in which the Irish themselves are complicit. Peter reinforces this catch-22 when he says "Its likely Michael himself was not thinking much of the fortune either, but of what sort the girl was to look at" (*CH*, 86). The children fell in love. The parents made the deal. Thus love can be, and according to common practice, *should* be bought. This type of representation, according to George Mosse, helps "to instill through representational practices an erotic *investment* in the national romance."<sup>117</sup> For all the concern the audience (including the Daughters of Erin) expressed regarding the depiction of Irish feminine virtue, the economic life of the peasants demanded that real women, and the Irish ideals they represent, become actual, physical commodities.

### **Cathleen's Entrance**

It is only after Gregory sets down this scene deceptively simple in appearance, but actually quite complicated in construction, that the metaphorical "star" appears on stage. In a play entitled *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, roughly 30% of the play is performed before that character actually appears. Though the cheers that follow the Poor Old Woman into the Gillane household indicate to the audience that she is associated with the French arrival and the celebration down in the city, the Gillanes, interested in their own personal domestic drama, do not make the same connection. Bridget assumes that

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<sup>117</sup> George L. Mosse, "Nationalism and Sexuality," *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker et al. (London: Routledge, 1992), 12, emphasis mine.

her appearance must be related to the upcoming wedding, saying “It might be some poor woman heard we were making ready for the wedding and came to look for her share” (CH, 87). Peter agrees, and responds with, “I may as well put the money out of sight” (CH, 87). Obsessed, out of necessity, with their own good fortune and upcoming prosperity, they cannot conceive of the important events occurring outside their home, much less of the supernaturally important figure approaching their threshold. She comes up the walk with a cloak covering her face, hiding her identity from the family, as well as from the audience, but she cannot quite obliterate the aura that surrounds her.

That aura, of course, was not only that of the mythological queen, but also that of the very real social sovereign playing Cathleen on the stage. According to Antoinette Quinn, the initial productions of the play were in real danger of being misunderstood by the prospective audience. Lady Gregory, prior to opening night, had expressed concerns that the audience might confuse the Cathleen of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* with the Cathleen of *The Countess Cathleen* (OK, 214). The real conflict was in staging a metaphorical symbol, a supernatural Cathleen, within a realistic peasant household, and according to Quinn, “without Maud Gonne’s collaboration they might not have pulled it off.”<sup>118</sup> Playing opposite Willie Fay, a well known comedian, Gonne bore the substantial responsibility of bringing the play to the serious level to which it aspired. The result was that Fay’s presence and the specter of the *Countess Cathleen*’s failure “were more than

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<sup>118</sup> Antoinette Quinn, “Cathleen ni Houlihan Writes Back: Maud Gonne and Irish Nationalist Theater,” *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, eds. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Boston: U of Mass P, 1997), 45; hereafter cited as CHW.

compensated for by Maud Gonne's considerable notoriety in Dublin as an exceptionally ardent and beautiful nationalist" (*CHW*, 46).

It was Gonne, then, who introduced the necessary supernatural influence into the play, collaborating with Yeats's dream and Gregory's realism to provide the composite national icons, the high aspirations, the realistic troubles, and the spiritual eroticism that worked together to answer the question of what it meant to be Irish. Taking a page from Yeats's metaphorical performance manual, Gonne drew the routine off the stage and into and amongst the audience, assisting Gregory's agenda of introducing the concept that the revolution was not merely about idealism. Rather, revolution had an omnipresent, often painful influence on all lives involved. Cathleen's appearance at the Gillane doorstep, but also the revolution she represented to the people in the audience, had real-world implications. A blood sacrifice would need to be made for the idealism personified by the character on stage, and the suffering, but also the sexiness, is what led to the play's far-reaching thrall. As Quinn goes on to write, "Gonne brought to the part of the *femme fatale* an erotic charge all the more potent for being covert, her disguised beauty colluding with the dialogue" written by Gregory, which was "titillating by its promise of a final unveiling" (*CHW*, 46).<sup>119</sup>

Gregory and Gonne's unlikely partnership epitomizes the tension and the unification that results in *Cathleen*'s success. Gregory opened the door to Gonne's portrayal and Gonne's entrance ensured the audience's fiery support of the play. On

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<sup>119</sup> Quinn also goes on to write that "Her late arrival for the premiere, sweeping through the auditorium in her costume when the audience was already seated, consciously or unconsciously anticipated the play's conclusion, preempting Yeats's script" (*CHW*, 46).

stage it is Bridget who instructs Michael to allow the Old Woman to enter, opening the door to the representative symbol that will tear her family and their future apart. Despite the drama of the revolution, Gregory refused to allow the audience to forget the ongoing sacrifice mothers of sons/soldiers had made, and would continue to make. As Harris writes, the “polar opposition of Bridget and Cathleen dramatizes the impossibility, for those who adhere to *Cathleen’s* version of nationalism, of both serving Ireland and remaining in the land of the living” (*BWO*, 480). Gregory, by allowing the mother of the son to make the ultimate choice to “open the door” to mother Ireland, squarely places the female side of the Irish population, whether *femme fatale* or mother goddess/national icon, in a critical position in the battle for independence. In fact, Bridget cautions Michael not to “keep the old woman waiting” (*CH*, 87).

Harris argues that “there is no third option: the hero chooses glorious death or ignominious life, and female characters can only function as sirens tempting him toward one or the other” (*BWO*, 480). The complexity of the Old Woman’s construction, however, invites other possible readings. Cathleen as symbol represents transformation. As Bessai writes, there was no original queenly Cathleen upon which the old stories are based. “The choice of name . . . was ‘quite fortuitous.’ The original Cathleen ni Houlihan . . . was just an ordinary girl whose name accumulated patriotic significance” (*WWC*, 116).<sup>120</sup> The power of her transformation into a queen comes from the faith of the Irish people, and their desire to have for themselves a symbol to separate them from English royal oppression. Beyond that, “Yeats’s Cathleen is,” among a number of other

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<sup>120</sup> Bessai is, in part quoting from *Songs of the Irish*, cited above.

things, “not literally hag or crone, but a pathetic mild old woman of the roads forced to roam because she had been deprived of her ‘four green fields’” (WWC, 119). Combine these disparate forces with Gonne’s “weirdly supernatural” performance, by all accounts powerful to occult standards, and the audience is faced with a picture and an icon much more multifarious than that of a simple siren.<sup>121</sup>

This beggar/siren/Queen is quick to begin exercising her power:

I have traveled far, very far; there are few have traveled so far as myself, and there’s many a one that doesn’t make me welcome. There was one that had strong sons I thought were friends of mine, but they were shearing their sheep, and they wouldn’t listen to me. (CH, 87)

She is an icon without a congregation – a national treasure who is no longer treasured. She finds the energy to travel in her faith that her subjects will not deny her the sacrifice she requires, but the further she travels the more she finds that those whom she believed to be her loyal subjects, i.e., loyal nationalists, have turned away. What they have to give, they refuse her. It is in this first Old Woman speech that Yeats’s presence is clearly felt. The Old Woman has no difficulty in asserting that her fate is and was far worse than those of her people – that her loss of symbolic meaning far outweighs the immediate physical danger of the individual.

The tension between Gregory’s realism and Yeats’s symbolism is constantly present. The Old Woman is not simply a symbol of suffering. She is also a symbol of resistance and resilience. She’s old – a feat difficult to accomplish in itself, in a land torn by poverty and war. Only the strongest and the most tenacious could survive to be

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<sup>121</sup> For a fascinating collection of reviews of Maud Gonne’s performances in the first productions of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, see Antony Coleman’s “A Calendar for the Production and Reception of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*,” cited above.

“old.” Beyond that, though, Bridget points out to the Old Woman that “it is a wonder [the Old Woman is] not worn out with so much wandering” (*CH*, 88). The wording of Bridget’s comment is important for two reasons. First, it isn’t the woman’s lack of food, clothing or material goods that threatens to wear her out – it is her constant wandering. In essence, what threatens the Old Woman is her dedication to her cause, and her lack of “friends” who share her passion. If she could more quickly find those dedicated to the resurrection of old Ireland, she’d be less in danger of being worn out. Second, Bridget’s mention of the threat as that of *being* worn out is important. The Old Woman isn’t threatened by death or starvation – she is symbolic and not physical. Therefore, the danger she faces as a symbolic figure of Ireland is that she will become tired, hackneyed – a cliché representation no longer holding the meaning necessary to link the Irish to the constructed identity they believe they are losing through colonization.

She suffers from too many British in her Irish land, and too many Irish who have made themselves strangers to her and her to them. But the Gillanes do not turn the Old Woman away. Despite the fact that they are slow to understand why she is there, they welcome her in and give her a seat by the fire. At least on this constructed stage, these two worlds of symbolism and realism can try to occupy the same space. The family tries to identify the Old Woman as a member of their world – she speaks of lost land, her “four beautiful green fields” (*CH*, 88). Those fields are a reference to Ireland in its totality, taken from the Irish through British colonization, but the family understands it in terms of their immediate world – an eviction. The play functions most clearly as a mirror here – or more than a mirror, a multi-tiered looking glass that depicts a composite



image, one that deals with the practical implications of daily peasant life, and the symbolic nature of the events unfolding on stage. The desires of the audience both compete with and accentuate the desires of the author(s). Gregory romanticizes the real concerns of survival and the true horrors of the evictions while at the same time showing the self-involved, short-sighted political nature of the audience viewing the play.

Yeats's symbolism works in an effort to elevate, and perhaps complicate, that self-involvement by committing it to a more theoretical reflection. Maud Gonne and the Daughters of Erin refuse to let the audience's focus drift too far from the immediately political. The audience is asked to look at itself, its national identity and history in all of its glory and in all of its flaws, and to understand that what it wants in a nation, and what it needs to sacrifice to accomplish that desire, is compound. Much like a reflection in a mirror, the audience can choose the aspect of the reflection upon which they'd like to focus, but the mirror itself displays both weaknesses and strengths – both the beauty and the evil.

As has been stated above, the Old Woman's speech marks a transition in the authorship of the play. The peasant speech and the colloquial scene of the family by the hearth are replaced by the Old Woman's monologue, spoken in verse form. She is prompted to speak by Peter who asks her if she "heard the noise of cheering" as she came up the hill (*CH*, 88). Interestingly, the authors of the play arrange for the audience to recognize the cheering as something coinciding with the "rise" of the Old Woman. Though within the reality and history of the play the cheering probably emanates from villagers welcoming the French and their aid in the resistance against the English, within

the context of the play, the Old Woman's rise is cause for cheer; the closer she comes to the house, the more the family becomes distracted from its immediate concerns. The play negotiates a difficult emotional complication here. An audience filled with individuals, filled with families with children who will marry, with bills to pay and fortunes to make, would naturally resent or even fear the presence of the Old Woman since part of her symbolic meaning is associated with war and destruction. She ultimately annihilates the Gillanes' domestic happiness and future financial prosperity. At the same time, national fervor and revolutionary zeal were at least supposed to be the motivation for the Irish Literary Theatre. Therefore, despite the fact that the Gillanes and the audience will both be asked to make great sacrifices, their sacrifices will be answered with the ascension of the Old Woman/Queen, Ireland, and consequently cause a change that is welcomed and cheered by the crowd.

The Old Woman claims to remember a time when the cheers followed her and those who were her "friends." She then begins to sing an old folk song, probably authored by Yeats:

I will go cry with the woman,  
For yellow-haired Donough is dead,  
With a hempen rope for a neckcloth,  
And a white cloth on his head,-- (CH, 88)

Yet even in Yeats's verse, Gregory's influence can be seen. In examining the folk tales she so carefully collected and translated, one can see the story *not* of a simple peasant farmer, Donough, but that of a stately and benevolent King, O'Donoghue.<sup>122</sup> In the

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<sup>122</sup> As the fable goes, O'Donoghue was a wise and just ruler, and during his reign his people were prosperous and happy. According to Lady Gregory's translation he was as renowned for his warlike

legend, located in the time for which the Old Woman is so nostalgic, there was no separation between peaceful family life and a warlike state. One was always present to protect the other. In addition, O'Donoghue was famous for his equal distribution of the law, and his willingness to sacrifice to retain that equality – even if it meant the sacrifice of his own son. The story speaks of “a rocky island...pointed out to strangers...in which this prince once confined his own son for some act of disorder and disobedience” (*TIM*, 201). In other words, O'Donoghue, the fabled prince to whom the Old Woman is so attached, would not hesitate to sacrifice his own son for the greater good of Ireland, and this oblique reference to a treasured yet nearly lost story from the peasants serves as a foreshadowing for the audience of what is soon to be asked of the Gillanes.

The difference between O'Donoghue and the Donough of which the Old Woman sings is palpable. Rather than a gracious Lord and King of his people (and an Irish King at that – one that predated any colonial British interference in the hierarchy), Donough, as described by the Old Woman's song, is a starving peasant farmer – one who is being mourned by those who witnessed his execution and by the Old Woman who represents all of Ireland. She begins her song by excluding herself from the action on stage, singing in a disembodied “I” that “will go cry with the woman” (*CH*, 88). At this point Yeats's verse shows an Old Woman who is representative of Ireland, but also so absent of “friends” that she must keep herself company as she mourns the losses her country suffers. The other “woman” in the song mourns “for yellow-haired Donough” who is now dead. His yellow hair is a rough and hardly comparable replacement for the golden

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exploits as for his pacific virtues. *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*, eds. W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory (New York: Avenel. 1986), 201; hereafter cited as *TIM*.

crown once worn by the fabled O'Donoghue. And Donough, unlike his parabolic analogue, "is dead." He doesn't triumph over death or the English for the sake of his people. Rather, Donough *is* the people, suffering under the yolk of oppression foretold by O'Donoghue.

Michael, the figure of hope for both the family and the Old Woman, interrupts her song, questioning her with regards to what she is singing. O'Donoghue has become unrecognizable to those who should have been the first to be familiar with his story, a contradiction probably not lost on an audience in the throws of a cultural revival as well as a renaissance, and who would have prided themselves on reclaiming the history they thought had been taken from them by the British. The Old Woman explains to Michael that she sings of her old friend Donough, who was hanged in Galway. Though the story of O'Donoghue is really a fable popular in southern Ireland, Yeats relocates Donough to be farther north, in an area of the county hit hardest by the famine and by evictions, but also located directly across from Dublin, and as far to the west as one could get while still being on the Irish island. The Old Woman goes on in her song to lament the loss of her friend, and to describe him as a peasant farmer most remembered for his hard work, his "ploughing his field,/Turning up the red side of the ground,/And building his barn on the hill/With the good mortared stone" (*CH*, 89). The difference between the King and the farmer, the height from which the iconic figure has fallen, is a direct indictment to the audience. Those who have worked to "revive" Irish heritage and valorize the peasant by recognizing the English landlords' responsibility in the potato famine have, in their

zeal, killed their royal figures, their kings, and exchanged them for much more mortal, and thus erasable, forms.<sup>123</sup>

The weak Donough is easily hanged in Galway, but Yeats was sure to close the song with “O! we’d have pulled down the gallows/Had it happened in Enniscrone!” (CH, 89). Other than simply fulfilling an *abab* rhyme scheme, Yeats’s reference to Enniscrone is both a reference to a much more valorized cultural history and to his own personal life. Enniscrone is just outside of Sligo, Yeats’s other home,<sup>124</sup> and also the sight of a great number of both historical and mythical battles.<sup>125</sup> In other words, the Old Woman indicts the people of Galway and those who so idolize the people of the west, who valorize the peasant farmer and the martyr-like suffering so often depicted in Irish stage drama at the time, for their unwillingness to violently resist the death of Donough – both the peasant farmer and all those like him who actually suffered and died – and the mythological O’Donoghue who was mutated into the weak Donough, thus destroying the cultural strength of a warlike mythological icon.

At the end of this short song, Michael is entranced. He asks the Old Woman why Donough had to die, and she replies that “he died for love of me: many a man has died

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<sup>123</sup> The layers of responsibility here can be confusing, especially considering the many-tiered construction of reception designed by the author(s). The play takes place in 1798, and therefore the Gillanes cannot be aware of the impending famine. The Irish Potato Famine was most serious between 1845 and 1851, 50 years past the landing at Killala. The famine would only be one generation removed from *Cathleen*’s first audiences, and was a common subject of nationalist dramas. Therefore, for the authors’ revolutionary and nationalistic purpose to be properly communicated, the characters must at least foreshadow the meaning of an event that, within a realistic timeline, they could not yet be aware.

<sup>124</sup> Other, amusingly enough, than London – conveniently not mentioned in this historical play.

<sup>125</sup> The sight still houses Enniscrone Castle, the location of a number of battles in the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and also an area of the country full of mythological victories over invading enemies, such as the Black Pig and the Mermaids. There are a number of resources available on the history of Enniscrone, including Lady Gregory’s above cited *Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*. For a convenient and easily accessible resource, see also <http://www.enniscroneonline.com/history/index.htm>. This website has links to a number of print sources available for historical study.

for love of me” (*CH*, 89). It is important that the Old Woman doesn’t dress up the revolutionary call in purely heroic, impossibly victorious rhetoric. She is clear that many have died and many will continue to die. In fact, it is implied in her song that many have died not because of the English, but because of the Irish’s willingness not to object, not to “pull the gallows down.”

In the end she reminds the audience that revolution in theory and in song is only a way to send more Irish to their deaths, either by keeping those revolutionary few a mere few, doomed to defeat against an organized British multitude, or by damning their Irish compatriots through their inaction, leaving more to suffer and die while they protect their individual prosperity – and go to see plays. Through this rhetoric, the effect of the collaboration is most apparent. Yeats’s need to be seen as the Great Poet and lyrical master of the stage creates a character highly representational, speaking primarily in verse. *What* she says, because of its verse form, is available to interpretation because of the context set up by Gregory’s peasant drama. Yeats’s High Culture and iconic worship come together with the politically famous Maud Gonne and the real individual and national sacrifice expressed by Gregory in order to demonstrate the Irish identity in its actual form, one that is hopelessly fractured and fused together through nostalgia and performance. The slippery Irish identity would not always be so willing to accept the introduction of new themes into its national consciousness, as J.M Synge would eventually discover, but at this early stage of the Irish Literary Theater’s evolution, as it made its transition to the Abbey and to national prominence, the authors of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* could rest knowing their play was a success, and their message received.

## CHAPTER IV

### LYING AND THE LONELY WOMAN IN *PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

The riots in response to J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* are some of the most dramatic that occurred in the early years of the Abbey Theatre. In addition, as Brenda Murphy notes, "the play has been a critical problem since the riots at its opening in 1907 required men and women of letters in Ireland, Britain, and North America to take a stand on its depiction of the Irish character, its use of plain language and freedom with the names of God and the saints, and its general decency as a work of art."<sup>126</sup> Lore surrounding the play and the ensuing riots indicates, Declan Kiberd notes, that "nationalists rejected a work which appeared to satirize a drunken, amoral peasantry at a time when all patriotic dramatists of the national theatre were expected to celebrate a sturdy people ready for the responsibilities of self-government."<sup>127</sup> According to stories commonly told about the riots, response to the play's early performances had the audience erupting in hisses and boos, spontaneous speechifying and violent action against the cast, inspired primarily by the Act III mention of the word "shift" (a term for a woman's slip or intimate piece of underclothing).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Brenda Murphy, "The Treachery of Law': Reading the Political Synge," *Colby Quarterly* 28:1 (Mar. 1992), 45; hereafter cited as *TL*.

<sup>127</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2002), 168; hereafter cited as *II*.

<sup>128</sup> For an exhaustive account and analysis of the *Playboy* riots see J. Kilroy, *The Playboy Riots* (Dublin, Dolemen, 1971). For a more abbreviated but far more amusing "play by play" commentary of the mutinous responses to the *Playboy's* opening week, see Hugh Kenner, "A Bag of Cats." *A Colder Eye* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983), 19-42; hereafter cited as *CE*.

Yet the problems the audience had with Synge's "peasant drama" go far beyond religious or moral differences of opinion with regards to public semantics.<sup>129</sup> Synge included a lengthy preface to his play in the program distributed at the performances, and in this preface he writes "on the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy, and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in a place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality."<sup>130</sup> In other words, Synge promised the audience a picture of "truth," an accurate portrayal of the idealized western peasant, especially the female western peasant, constructs that Dublin audiences had wholeheartedly adopted as icons of nationalist sentiment and Irish purity. Yet "Synge was less interested in the colonial present than in the future. Assuming the inevitability of Home Rule, he tried instead to see . . . into the Mayoites's culture [so] that the shape of their future might be discernable." Rather than focus on the abuses suffered by the western peasants and their heroic, martyred endurance, Synge "took the violence of the colonizers as read: his deeper interest was in how the colonized cope with the violence in themselves, their situation and their daily life" (*II*, 166). Instead of offering them Yeats's royal and romanticized Countess, Gregory/Yeats's iconic Cathleen, or even his own pitiful but resilient Maura from *Riders to the Sea*, Synge offered the audience his personal definition of the "truth" of western Irish identity – that the experience of their

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<sup>129</sup> As Murphy notes, the term "peasant" may be a misnomer when applied to this play. ". . . 'small farmers,' 'a young farmer,' and 'a squatter' are separate ideological concepts from 'peasants' . . . characters who figure in the action are a squatter and his son and several members of the petit bourgeoisie – a publican and his daughter and some farmers. There isn't a real 'peasant' among them" (*TL*, 47, note 7).

<sup>130</sup> Reprinted in *Irish Drama: 1900-1980*, eds. Colín D. Owens & Joan N. Radner, (Washington D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 1990), 115.



lonely, violent and complicated lives left them strong and resilient, but also flawed and fallible: there were some who were good, some who were bad, some who swore, some who felt sexual attraction and/or sexual jealousy, and some who, driven by the loneliness of the far-from-ideal life in the west, could be driven to acts of extremity, and even irrationality.

National identity on the Irish stage had substantially evolved from Yeats's first failed attempt almost ten years earlier. Yeats's effort to obliterate difference by presenting an alternative aristocratic ideal had disappointed and confused his audience. Lady Gregory and Yeats had later successfully collaborated on *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and in so doing, marginally succeeded in forcing the audience to accept and overlook their differences. At this point, though, Synge felt ready to reintroduce individuality back into the national identity. Synge's goal was to challenge the audience to move beyond the "symbol of the peasant [that] . . . stood for the antiquity, dignity, resource and distinctiveness of the Irish race," because by universalizing the identity of Irishness under the banner of the generalized "Irish peasant," the very real, very powerful nature of the Irish experience was being neutralized.<sup>131</sup> Art and the independent mind were being sacrificed for political propaganda, and Synge wanted no part in the latter.

By January of 1906, the excitement that surrounded the genesis of the Irish Literary Theatre, now known as the Abbey Theatre, had waned. Ticket-buying crowds were thinning, and both the management and the cast of actors were expressing dissatisfaction in the plays they were forced to present. Peasant plays, a familiar genre

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<sup>131</sup> David Cairns and Shaun Richards, "Reading a Riot: The 'Reading Formation' of Synge's Abbey Audience," *Literature and History* 13:2 (Autumn 1987), 219; hereafter cited as *RR*.

by this point, no longer attracted the paying crowds the theatre needed. Yeats argued that “the theatre ‘could not run indefinitely on peasant comedy.’ The actors it had lost through secessions had . . . been among the best.”<sup>132</sup> A dispute had arisen between Yeats and Lady Gregory about Yeats’s insistence that the Abbey should produce more cosmopolitan dramas originating from international writers. Fortunately, several significant changes in the Abbey in 1906 would serve to subdue these disagreements and create a new atmosphere of enthusiasm and revolution. Willie Fay was hired to be the new managing director, and given a substantial increase in salary. In addition, a fresh effort was launched to address Lady Gregory’s concern that some “new excitement” be introduced into the theatre’s next season (*YL*, 357).

That excitement was to be offered by Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*. By Christmas of 1906, it had “forcibly altered WBY’s view of the Abbey Theatre’s needs. Both his artistic judgment and his intellectual honesty left him in no doubt that this was not only Synge’s masterpiece, but a masterpiece of a new sort” (*YL*, 357). By his own account, Synge “never bother[ed] whether [his] plots [were] typical Irish or not,” and by his effort at independence he was able to accomplish substantial innovation, especially in the depiction of Irish peasant women.<sup>133</sup> Synge was far more interested in the experiences of the individual than in producing propaganda for an emerging nation. Instead, he wrote *Playboy* because “it pleased” him and because he felt he knew “Irish life best” (*CE*, 32). In this respect he was very similar to Yeats when Yeats first wrote

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<sup>132</sup> R.F.Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 354; hereafter cited as *YL*.

<sup>133</sup> E.H. Mikhail, ed. *J.M. Synge: Interviews and Recollections* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 40.

*The Countess Cathleen*. However, while Yeats obsessed over his unrequited love for Maud Gonne, Synge fixated on the Aran Islands.

Synge had made a number of trips to the Aran Islands, and with an anthropological attention to detail, observed the islanders' customs, personalities, and systems of speech. He also traveled frequently to western Ireland where his mother kept a summer house, and felt he was happiest when mingling with the people who lived in the surrounding countryside.<sup>134</sup> At the same time, though, Synge lived a good portion of his life abroad, traveled almost constantly, and mastered at least six languages beyond his native English. He did not consider himself to be merely a nationalist politician creating plays to further "the cause." Instead, he was an artist interested in the Irish people as individual subjects who could, at different levels, embody universal truths, and as unique receptors of his message. In other words, he "drew upon his knowledge of traditional Irish narrative and storytelling to portray social and human capabilities and failings in a way that reflected his views not only of Irish society but of the human condition in general."<sup>135</sup>

In essence, in service of a nationalist agenda, he wanted to free the Irish people from a constant need to define themselves by a highly idealized, highly regimented, highly *false* icon of the Irish peasant. Rather, he sought to offer the audience the opportunity to grow to a point where they could accept individual depictions of members

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<sup>134</sup> There are very few complete, academic biographies of Synge in print. For a detailed account of Synge's personal (not artistic) life, see *John Millington Synge: A Biography*, David M. Kiely, (New York: St. Martin's P, 1994); hereafter cited as *JMS*. For a brief and far less flattering sketch of Synge's life, see Denis Donoghue, "Synge and his Letters," *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 209-213.

<sup>135</sup> Julie Henigan, "'The Power of a Lie': Irish Storytelling Tradition in *The Playboy of the Western World*," *New Hibernia Review* 6:3 (Autumn 2002), 92; hereafter cited as *PL*.

of their nation as just that – individual. This artistic gesture, though similar in motivation to his other Abbey compatriots, was different in execution. Yeats had tried to conjure a new national identity through abstract symbolism, and had succeeded only in mystifying his audience. When Gregory and Yeats collaborated on a play, they managed to cobble together a picture of Irish nationality that could be symbolic of a revolutionary ideal, but only obliquely referenced the real lives of individual Irish. Synge, however, was far less interested in politics than he was in life. His trips to the Aran Islands taught him that being Irish meant far more than being political, and in his mind and art, politics was only a necessary tangent and rarely of primary significance.

For Synge, politics was always a divisive force and the product of art, rather than its motivation. The people of the Aran islands knew little or nothing of the activities on the mainland, and western peasants living just to the islanders' east were almost never helped by Dublin agitators. Yeats had previously stated in a pamphlet giving advice to playwrights who might seek to submit manuscripts to the Abbey, that the theatre was not interested in

propagandist plays, nor plays written mainly to serve some obvious moral purpose: for art seldom concerns itself with those interests or opinions that can be defended by argument, but with realities of emotion and character that become self-evident when made vivid to the imagination. (Qtd. in YL, 358).

*Playboy* offered Synge a chance to show the Irish audience that they could survive as a nation, that they might even be stronger as a nation, if they allowed an honest reflection of themselves to be presented on the stage. Even if that reflection wasn't ideal and even if it wasn't overtly political, their real power came from their unique culture and language, and their exceptional ability to continue to live as

individuals, even in some of the most unthinkable conditions. At the same time, *Playboy* offered Yeats an opportunity to make good on his insistence that the Abbey Theatre was indeed a literary theatre, whose intentions were patriotic but whose aspirations were mainly artistic. Thus, the Abbey could grow with the audience, incorporating more cosmopolitan and unique plays such as *Playboy* which, though inspired by a story Synge heard while visiting the Aran Islands, incorporated elements of drama much more common to the current French and German stages.<sup>136</sup> By convincing the audience that “Irish life [was] most authentic when at its strangest,” *Playboy* challenged the audience to face what was reflected to them in the mirror of the stage – not the mythical Cuchulain or Cathleen, but representations of actual human beings who, despite being less than perfect, deserved to coalesce as a nation (RR, 219).

### **Whose Play Is It Anyway?**

A substantial volume of research has been produced about this play, and as the numerous depictions of the riots that resulted from the first production of *The Playboy of the Western World* show, the audience was fundamentally unprepared to grasp the message that Synge and the Abbey were trying to communicate. Rather than anger or umbrage at what was *later* construed as offensive language and imagery, however, it is more accurate to say that the initial reaction was one of confusion. David Cairns and Shaun Richards argue that a miscommunication between the artist, the theatre and the audience led to a “causal relationship between expectation and actuality” that eventually

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<sup>136</sup> See the Kiely’s biography, cited above, for a description of how Synge was influenced by and interested in continental European plays, especially those of the French and German. The chapter entitled “The Young Lady Says ‘No!’” speaks specifically about his construction of *Playboy* and the European influences that affected its composition.

resulted in the disruption and violence (*RR*, 219). H.R. Jauss has coined the term “horizon of expectations” to identify the collection of assumptions an audience makes based on their understanding of “aesthetic norms” and “previous literary encounters.”<sup>137</sup> It is clear from the audience’s response to the original performances of the play that the Abbey audience’s horizon of expectations was challenged to the point of rupture, and it was this split between what was expected and what was actually offered that inspired the audience to riot. Peasant dramas had trained Abbey audiences to expect the heroic and pure, but as they were soon to discover, Synge’s emphasis was on the comic and the iconoclastic.

Synge was a skeptic and a cynic who astutely observed the discrepancy between the audience’s well established concept of the idealized western peasant, and the actuality of their often violent and lonely lives. Edward Hirsch has argued that for Synge the concept of “peasant was simply an ideological concept . . . that he used [for] realistic representation as a means to gain the audience’s identification with this concept” (*TL*, 47). Yet as Louis Althusser has argued, “the spectator has no other consciousness than the content which unites him to the play in advance, and the development of this content in the play itself.”<sup>138</sup> What the audience expected from their attendance at the Abbey was a confirmation of the identity they felt secured by the earlier peasant plays, many of which were popular yet simplistic attempts at repeating the success of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Yet Synge wanted to use this expectation as a

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<sup>137</sup> H.R. Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Trans. T. Bahti (Brighton: Harvester P, 1982), 3.

<sup>138</sup> Louis Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzo and Brecht,” *For Marx* (London: Verso, 1979), 151.

starting point rather than an endpoint. Instead of offering them a political “peasant play” to satisfy what had become highly mundane artistic tastes, he would offer them a realistic-cum-comic play about peasants. The difference was that the “peasant plays” performed by theatres other than the Abbey were, by and large, designed to please and to entertain. As has been discussed above, however, the Irish Literary Theatre, later to become the Abbey Theatre, would organize itself in an effort to eschew entertainment in exchange for pedagogy. Synge’s *Playboy* was the next step in the evolution of this pedagogy, and in the tradition of any good lesson, he sought to challenge his students rather than placate them. The result, however, was that the audience perceived the change as a subversion of their established national icons and not an opportunity for growth and expansion. Their “horizon of expectations” faced a “frontal attack on the audience’s ideology.”<sup>139</sup>

Synge refused to continue the validation of political and personal reasons an Abbey audience might, at least at one point in their nation’s evolution, have needed an idealized version of itself displayed on the stage. Gregory and Yeats recognized the falling off in audience attendance and knew that for attention to remain focused on the Abbey, the Abbey had to return to being provocative. Thus experimentation with the commonly accepted version of the peasant and her lifestyle would be an ideal subject matter for someone who had spent an extensive amount of time studying life in the west. For members of organizations such as the Gaelic League, “it was imperative to oppose the spread of Anglicization and to counter the Anglo-Saxonist image of ‘the peasant’ as

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<sup>139</sup> Edward Hirsch, “The Gallous Story and the Dirty Deed: The Two *Playboys*,” *Modern Drama* 26 (1983), 86.

a simian rural idiot whose adherence to the Irish language” and rural farming lifestyle “identified him as poor and ignorant” (*RR*, 223). Propaganda that countermanded this English depiction of Irishness was considered to be essential for diminishing the power of the negative “stage Irishman” stereotype, and zeal for such propaganda made it almost unthinkable for negative images of this icon of Irish purity to be displayed. “Woe betide the writer or dramatist who did not endorse that generalization” (Qtd. in *RR*, 223). For Synge, then, the obvious contradictions between the idealized peasant icon and the actual peasant lifestyle would be laughable, as well as rich artistic fodder.

For Synge such propaganda only simplified the national identity to a point of actualizing the English conception of the “simian rural idiot.” His experiences in the west, and especially in Mayo, gave him an intimate understanding of the lives of the people there, and he refused to see their strength and resilience (and their hardship and loneliness) written out of the national history merely for ease in political evangelism. Instead, he felt that by illustrating in “precise, sometimes painful detail” the complex reality of their lives, especially the lives of the women, he could reach a universal representation far more accessible to the audience because his representation would not allow itself to be concretized and, thus, castrated (*TL*, 47). A living and evolving nation was filled with individual lives, all evolving and changing. Symbols and icons raised to the level of religious sanctity were stagnant and unchanging. Comedy, however, was disruptive and animate. It is in this living combination of individuality and comedy that Synge found his method of expressing Ireland.



Yet the reasons for the audience's misunderstanding of the author's intent are understandable. The first staging of *Playboy* immediately followed a re-presentation of his popular nationalist favorite, *Riders to the Sea*. The tone of the two plays could not be more different, and making the emotional transition from the pathos of the Aran island tragedy to the irony-heavy comedy of *Playboy* would have, in and of itself, been a lot to ask of an audience. In an effort to save money, however, the company also used *exactly* the same set for the two performances. Here is an excellent example of the miscommunication, the denial of the audience's "horizon of expectations." The on-stage peasant cottage was well established by plays performed both inside and outside the Abbey to be the metaphorical protective space reserved for the retention of Gaelic purity. As Cairns and Richards explain, "the most potent sign of 'Irishness'" was the peasant cottage (*RR*, 225). Yet "when the curtain was raised for Act I of *The Playboy* it revealed . . . the set used by the previous play, a set optimized for realism" (*RR*, 231). Within this setting, Synge tried to move the audience, without warning, from a piece designed to inspire pity for and empathy with the intense strength required to survive life in the far western islands, to a comic farce satirizing not necessarily the western Irish peasant, but rather the audience's preconceived notions regarding how the west was depicted. Without even a visual cue that the message and mood were changing, and with the note in the play's preface claiming "truth," the audience was left to assume that this play represented a return to the offensive conventions of the stage Irishman buffoonery they had hoped so long to escape. Synge assumed his audience would enter with an open mind, but years of English colonization, revolutionary propaganda and heavy

symbolic pedagogy by the popular theatres had made such an “open mind” highly unlikely, if not almost impossible. In a country just on the verge of being born, new forms of art were at best suspect, and at worst, destructive.

In an emerging colonized nation, nothing could be more politically destructive than something that would make that nation’s claims to independence appear false to their colonizers and to the international community. The Irish nationalist audience, then, was understandably suspect when it thought that Synge’s *Playboy* was an attempt to make the “nation of Ireland” a laughable concept, and Ireland’s claims to authenticity, based heavily in an invented history symbolized by the idealized western peasant, a blatant lie. Yet Synge recognized that the peasant as a symbol *was* a lie, and the Irish national theatre’s dependence on it was, indeed, laughable. Only in confronting this lie and exposing it for what it was, could another “truth” of the Irish experience be unearthed and expressed. The night of the *Playboy*’s premier, the audience was treated to the spectacle not only of Christie’s conspicuous lie, but also to the theatrical form itself as a particularly Irish form of the folkloric lie. The result was incendiary. It is not a reach to say that the audience at the Abbey felt that they had been lied to, not by themselves or by the nationalist propaganda that had made the Irish peasant icon sacrosanct, but instead by Synge and the Abbey Theatre.

The issue of lying is a complicated one in Irish culture. Folklorist Carolyn Brown has written that a lie in folklore is “a fictional story which is told in the form of a personal narrative or anecdote, which challenges the listener’s credulity with comic outlandishness, and which performs different social functions depending on whether it is

heard as true or fictional.”<sup>140</sup> The key element to this definition is “whether it is heard as true or fictional.” As an audience composed primarily of political nationalists, sitting in a theatre which identified itself as Ireland’s national theatre, immediately after viewing a play that adhered to all the tenets of theatrical realism, *now* viewing a play that used exactly the same set and in the program proclaimed itself to be an artistic manifestation of the pursuit of truth, it is understandable that the audience might believe itself expected to perceive the staged lie as “true.” Yet the lie or “tall tale is double-edged, as it both manipulates the boundary between reality and fiction and depends upon the audience’s ability to discriminate between the two, thereby creating a tension between skepticism and belief” (*PL*, 95). In other words, if the audience is unable to properly negotiate these boundaries, it is left believing a lie to be the truth, or vice versa. It is left out of the joke and, consequently, becomes the butt of that joke.

Hence, the tension between the audience’s desire and preconceived notions of what would make a quality nationalist play and what the author understood to be a more “truthful” depiction of Irish peasant life (because comic and active, rather than iconic and stagnant) created the conflict that inspired the riots. Of course, terms such as the “true” or the “real” only validate constructions attempting to masquerade as something other than just that – constructions, so all truth and reality is in some sense, a lie. Yet Synge never claimed that *Playboy* offered a more accurate or authentic depiction of Irish identity, but rather that a shift in the genre used to reference that identity must occur. If more flexibility in the realm of presentation became acceptable, then a greater range of

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<sup>140</sup> Carolyn S. Brown, *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1987), 11.

characters could be demonstrated on stage (and Synge's particular interest was in the depiction of women on the stage). Through this difference, then, could a kind of accuracy be achieved, the accuracy that comes in admitting to one another that the nation is filled with different people impossible to be "accurately" represented in art, and through an acceptance of those differences, unities form.

*The Playboy of the Western World*, then, is a representation of a folkloric lie performed within the peasant drama's set for the purpose of achieving a kind of symbolic truth. The characters in the play illustrate the subtle ironies that lead to the audience's misunderstandings and subsequent displeasure. Through the disruptive power of comedy, those misunderstandings would abate, but in the initial presentation of *The Playboy* there were far more shouts than laughs. As Heidi Holder has argued, *Playboy* is not only a play about the power of language and imagination over the individual; it is also about the manipulation of language and imagination *by* the individual."<sup>141</sup> Synge hoped that his play might manipulate, through language, the individuals in the audience and to accomplish that goal, he offered a series of individual characters who also manipulated with their words.

The characters, each in their own turn, demonstrate the power of language, of both the "lie" and the "law," both on and off the stage. Within the overall "lie," or the dramatic construction of the play, is contained a series of truths. The foil to the power of the lie is, of course, the power of the law, pure language that controls and disciplines individual bodies and entire nations alike. Conversely, lies subvert the law and cause

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<sup>141</sup> Heidi Holder, "Between Fiction and Reality: Synge's *Playboy* and its Audience," *Journal of Modern Literature* 14:4 (Spring 1988), 527, emphasis mine; hereafter cited as *BFR*.

disruption, with disruption being possibly positive or negative, depending on one's perspective (especially in a country such as Ireland where an Irish individual's relationship to English law would depend upon his or her political affiliations at that moment). This flexibility and power of language allows *Playboy* to lie to the audience, and through that lie to explain some harsh truths about Irish peasantry, and Irish nationality.

As discussed above, theatrical convention and its miscommunication (or misapplication) incited riots during the performance of the play and outside the theatre, after the performance had concluded. One objection to the play voiced in the newspapers was that Irish peasants would never welcome a liar or a murderer into their community – that the pure and placid western Irish mentality would never be able to abide such extremes in personality. Kiberd, however, has argued that one reason behind the riots was that though the Dublin public proclaimed the play a lie, they saw inside the lie a more inherent, core truth. The audience of Dublin urbanites, on some visceral level, understood why the Mayo villagers could be so hungry for a fine story, and so desperate for violence.

The Mayoites . . . have no allegiance to the hated English law, which might allow them to channel their violence into socially-sanctioned punishments like the hanging of a murderer . . . Such a people desperately need a hero who can bring their instincts to violence into a single clear focus: a hero, moreover, whom they can then convert into a scapegoat, onto whom may be visited any troublesomely violent tendencies that are still unfulfilled. (*II*, 166)

Lie and law become conflated because the characters in the play (as well as the audience) have been forced to live under a system of law that did not protect them – and in fact worked to harm them. The rioting audience might not have consciously believed that they shared this common motivation with the characters on stage, but the end result

is that all were left without legitimate recourse to vent their frustrations, and all ultimately turned to violence. The finest irony, one Synge might have thought worthy of a comedic farce, is that the audience's riots actually proved the *Playboy's* effectiveness. Had the audience sat placidly and applauded in a disciplined and organized fashion, neither Synge nor the Abbey would have accomplished their predominant goal.

### **The Playboy's New Community**

The Abbey's need to rejuvenate their audience through controversy meant that those who had strayed from the theatre as a means of political statement were forced to return. At the same time, however, a theatre that claimed literary and artistic aims over the political would be a complicated context within which the political community felt necessary to reside. In the same respect, the community displayed by the *Playboy* is barely a community. Synge frequently wrote about the more "congested or distressed districts of the west," and in *Playboy* presents "a peasant culture under enormous stress from many different directions."<sup>142</sup> The disruptive Abbey audience would not find a peaceful or harmonic symbiosis between the various peasants depicted on the stage. Instead Pegeen, the publican's daughter and a main character in the production, describes her community as hardly being worth the parish priest's time. She says that "if I was him I wouldn't bother with this place where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were

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<sup>142</sup> Joseph Devlin, "The Source of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*," *Notes on Modern Irish Literature* 7:2 (Fall 1995), 5; hereafter cited as SS.

driven from California and they lost in their wits. We're a queer lot these times" (*PWW*, 119).<sup>143</sup>

Much like the Abbey audience, the town has become a diseased and decaying group "whose idyllic pre-industrialized culture" is threatened by both Dublin and London (*SS*, 5). Rather than suffer in sacred silence, the people of the west have turned to alcohol, abuse and abject cruelty to express their helpless frustration. In an example of what Murphy refers to as "a perverted and self-destructive strategy of the oppressed," Jimmy Farrell's treatment of his dog epitomizes the people's distorted relationship to their state, and more specifically, to the law (*TL*, 49). Pegeen tells Christy of how "Jimmy Farrell hanged his dog from the license, and had it screeching and wriggling three hours at the butt of a string, and himself swearing it was a dead dog, and the peelers swearing it had life" (*PWW*, 125). Within the world created by the play, Jimmy's actions are meant to be funny – the joke is that the dog, though far from dead, should legally be construed as dead, thus freeing Jimmy from having to pay the licensing fee.

The laughter, though, comes at a price. The idea of the peaceful western peasant is shattered with the image of the cruelty to which he is forced by the imposed law of the British. Also, however, the implication is that Pegeen enjoys retelling the story almost as much as her audience enjoys hearing it and, by their presence in the Abbey's

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<sup>143</sup> All references to Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* are taken from the collection entitled *Irish Drama: 1900-1980*, eds. Colín D. Owens & Joan N. Radner (Washington D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 1990), 115-166; this and all further references will be cited as *PWW*. 119. Red Linahan could also be a play on words referencing Yeats and Lady Gregory's early interest in Irish folklore – specifically the story of Red Hanrihan. For Yeats and Gregory's treatment of the Red Hanrihan myth, see *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend & Folklore*, eds. W.B. Yeats & Lady Augusta Gregory (New York: Avenel, 1986).

audience, that enjoyment is extended to those who view the play. The grotesque image of the dog “screeching and wriggling” for three hours as it slowly strangles to death is, in this world of inverted realism, secondary to Jimmy’s daring act of defying the “peelers,” or police, who swear that the dog is still alive. “This is a world where law and order is the oppressor” and “any violation of the law becomes a deed of glory,” regardless of the underlying moral implications that deed might involve” (*TL*, 49). Subversion of the law has taken a primary place in the minds of the peasants, and in so doing, has supplanted their sense of kindness and morality. The peasants are *not* ideal icons of purity and strength, but rather people seriously damaged by the effects of colonialism – not just in body and spirit, but in their moral core.

Thus Synge’s peasant world is one where morality has become relative to immediate experience. Actions are validated by their ability immediately to aid the community rather than their adherence to a universal code. This relative code of ethics, then, was another factor that caused the initial embarrassed confusion in the Dublin audience. Kiberd argues that the audience’s disturbances began far before the mention of the word “shift” in Act III, and therefore the audience’s displeasure was inspired by something other than a perceived implication that “Irish women share the amorality that supposedly accompanies sexual incontinence.”<sup>144</sup> Instead, he argues that

the monstrous spectacle of a deformed colonial life may have defeated the very sympathies which it could have aroused among nationalists in the audience. The frustration of knowing that they were more nauseated than sympathetic may have led many spectators to insure themselves against ensuing guilt by converting the play, through vilification and hearsay, into a genuine monster. (*II*, 167)

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<sup>144</sup> Susan Cannon Harris, “More than a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind: Public Health and the Playboy Riots,” *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (2000), 81; hereafter cited as *MM*.



The Abbey audience, primarily composed of Dublin's urban middle-class, artistic elite, and political leadership, shared very few, if any, characteristics with the idealized western rural farmer, and therefore they were mystified that their system of morality could be as tenuous and delicate as their own. When faced with a picture of their idealized national icon that was less than idyllic, that was, in fact, far more brutal and painful than their own supposedly "heroic" public lives, their instinct was to resist the idea that the depiction was based on any "truth."

Yet that brutality was exactly what Synge thought was most precious in the western rural experience, and most essential to a depiction of Irish character. In a letter written soon after the riots he states "the wildness and, if you will, vices of the Irish peasantry are due, like their extraordinary good points, to the *richness* of their nature, a thing that is priceless beyond words."<sup>145</sup> The brutality of their lives provided the individuals with the powerful language and poetry of their experience, and it was that essential combination of qualities Synge found most valuable. At the same time, their brutal existence outside of what was considered conventional morality could easily be attributed to the harsh conditions under which the British forced them to live. Like those nationalists in Ireland who broke the law in order to change it, Pegeen and her village need their brutality in order to survive. But this is not their fault, and through their very survival, they embody a political statement of resistance and revolution.

The intersection of language and violence, power and poetry was something Synge saw as a method of uniting the Irish people. Examples were readily available on

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<sup>145</sup> J.M. Synge, *Collected Letters 1: 1871 – 1907*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), 297.

both coasts of the island, and in both rural and urban atmospheres. His insight that “those who make rhetorical denials of their own violence invariably end up committing even more” was clearly illustrated by the audience members who rioted at his play (*II*, 171). The most obvious and obviously ironic example of both the violence and the lie is that many of the protesters shouted “We Irish are not violent people!” even as they sprang from their seats to assault the actors on stage (*II*, 168). Yet Synge insisted that poetry and violence went hand in hand, writing in the preface to his own collection of poetry that “before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal” (Qtd. in *II*, 169). He evinced that brutality in the unmitigated cruelty he infused in many of the *Playboy*’s characters.

As an example of an attempt to harness this force of brutality in the service of art, he offered the *Playboy* as a dramatic work that shows both the extent of human depravity and violence, but also the laughable fallibility of the human condition. If this fallibility could be faced, and the violence reincorporated into art, then the real weapon of power – language – could be more fully utilized for the achievement of both national and personal freedom. Ann Saddlemyer has suggested that the *Playboy* investigates “the constructive power of the imagination . . . the power of myth to create reality out of the dream or illusion itself.”<sup>146</sup> This power of the imagination can be considered one of the primary forces behind the play’s effectiveness, and also one of its central themes (*BFR*, 530). Ireland had seen the power of language and art when it created the Irish Literary Theatre and should have lamented the “air-brushed poster boys the peasants had

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<sup>146</sup> Ann Saddlemyer, *J.M. Synge and Modern Comedy* (Dublin: Dolmen P, 1968), 23.

become” (SS, 8). It had also fought to dispel that same power when it protested the presentation of the “stage Irishman.” A recognition of the power of the lie – in that it could be used for both good and evil – had already worked to unite the nation’s disparate people in the fragile representativeness claimed by *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. As will be demonstrated by the following discussion of the text of the play, Synge thought to test that power further by demonstrating how facing the lie was an essential element in the national and personal evolutionary process. People could use symbolic representations as a locus around which to unite, but they should never confuse the symbol with the real people it represented.

A theme central to the dramatic tension in the play, and one intimately connected to the power of the lie, is the concept of loneliness, especially as it is experienced by those peasants living on the rural farms so idolized by the urban Dublin audiences.<sup>147</sup> The matrix of loneliness, violence, and the desire for and power of language are what allow for the events that occur within the plot, as well as the transformation that occurs in both Christy Mahon and Pegeen Mike. The lies that are told, and the effect that they have when they are exposed, inspire the characters on stage to move beyond their concrete, stilted identities, allowing them to grow in spirit to a point that moves them beyond the oppressiveness of the law.

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<sup>147</sup> Rural loneliness is a theme Synge addresses elsewhere, most famously in his *The Shadow of a Glen*, another play that caused substantial controversy. Both *Shadow* and *Playboy* confront traditional notions of Irish life, specifically depicting Irish women driven to extreme actions in order to combat their loneliness.

## Inventing a Satisfying Truth

Christy Mahon is the central character and “hero” of the play, and one who defies easy definition.<sup>148</sup> This slippery identity structure comes from the fact that he does not enter the stage with any real personality of his own. Critics have argued that Christy is a sacrificial Christ figure, especially since the character’s name incorporates that of the deity.<sup>149</sup> Yet the absence that characterizes Christy is hardly analogous to the purity of character pursued by the Christian mythology, and at the end of the play it is Christy’s *father* who rises from the dead – twice – rather than Christy himself. Rather than the audience viewing Christy as a Christ figure, Christy should be viewed as more of an impersonator or liar. The characters within the story, and the audience along with them, invent a personality for Christy based on what they desire, and Christy fulfills that desire by accepting and embodying it, and thus living a lie. Christy’s ability to perceive where those desires rest and then to imitate them is what leads to his popularity. What Pegeen Mike and the other inhabitants of this small rural village desire most is a hero. What they also desire, though, is something to distract them from their lonely lives, made mundane by a lack of interaction with a variety of people and the cyclical life demanded of those who tend the land. Hence Christy’s entrance into the pub and the lives of the people around it is valuable first and foremost because he represents something new – someone who presents a mystery to unravel and who can provide fodder for their own

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<sup>148</sup> Clearly he and the rest of the cast defied definition for Synge as well. The play went through over 20 different revisions with the plot itself going through a great number of varied permutations. These permutations ranged from Christy and Pegeen marrying, to Christy running away with the Widow Quin, to the Widow Quin running away with both Christy and his father. For an interesting description of these different versions, see *BFR*, cited above.

<sup>149</sup> Mitsuhiko Ito, “Naming the Characters of Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*,” *Eire-Ireland* 27:2 (Summer 1992), 93; hereafter cited as *NCC*.

storytelling. When he enters the pub, he represents a blank page upon which the people of the town can write the story of the hero they need, and Christy is quick to assume whatever role they design for him, as long as it pleases them that he does so.

As Brenda Murphy writes, “much of the play’s action consists of Christy’s self-creation as a hero by means of his self-legendizing” (*TL*, 49). He embodies the town’s needs through the tales he tells. He finds and exercises power through the promulgation of lies. It is important to realize, though, that Christy does not initiate any of the storytelling that eventually becomes his primary talent. Rather, he takes his cues from the people around him, trying to please them in the process. This town is one that expects lies, and seizes upon an opportunity to use them to their benefit. His first words are benign at best, a sign of greeting and a request for some porter. It is only after Pegeen, Michael and Philly all press him that he begins to tell his story. They inquire about all sorts of crimes, from larceny to rape, from assault to, finally, murder. Yet it is only after Pegeen challenges him in his story that he is a “wanted man,” after she essentially calls him a *liar* that he hesitatingly confesses his crime. She claims “He’s done nothing, so. If you didn’t commit murder or a bad, nasty thing, or false coining, or robbery, or butchery, or the like of them, there isn’t anything that would be worth your troubling for to run from now. You did nothing at all.” His surprising response is “that’s an unkindly thing to be saying to a poor orphaned traveler” (*PWW*, 125). The obvious irony here is that Synge uses the exchange to indicate to his audience that the real crime is that of falsehood. Being accused of being a liar is far worse than being accused of being a murderer. At the same time, should Christy refuse to lie and say only

that he struck his father and ran away, he wouldn't be cast in the role of hero. In essence, lies are not only acceptable, they are rewarded, and the biggest reward of all comes from lies surrounding the brutal act of revolution against the tyrannous father.

Christy, though he is from another parish and therefore an outsider in this social set, is quick to understand the implications of being called a liar. Pegeen continues with "You're only saying it. You did nothing at all. A soft lad the like of you wouldn't slit the windpipe of a screeching sow." She encourages him to contradict her, so Christy turns the insult back on her and says "You're not speaking the truth" (*PWW*, 124). It is only in response to her "mock rage" at this insult that Christy finally confesses the reason for his 11 days of wandering through the Mayo countryside. At this point in the story, both the characters who surround Christy and Christy himself believe what he says to be true. The audience's immediate dislike of the unusual scene is telling. Within the context of the play, no lies have actually yet been told, and despite readings to the contrary, there is nothing in the stage directions to indicate that the people approve of parricide *per se*. Only Michael says "with great respect" that Christy's crime is one punishable by hanging, but this "respect" could as easily be directed towards Christy's willingness to face death himself, because the act he admitted to could result in his state-enforced, legal execution. In his willingness to face execution, he rejects the power of the English legal system to deter crime. In so doing, he rejects the power England exercises through their system of law (*PWW*, 125). Yet the foregrounding of the bloody action Christy needed to take to achieve his rebellion causes discomfort and fear in an

audience needing to see their own revolution as holy. At this point in the story, Christy's act of telling the truth exposes the audience's eagerness to hear a lie.

If the townspeople do express any approval, it is for Christy's bravery with respect to the "peelers," rather than for his brutal act against his father. The players in this farcical stage production are characterized by their violence and by their loneliness, but they are also characterized by their fear. As Murphy writes, "if one looks at the play's world from the viewpoint of the Mayo peasants, its dominant reality is fear" (*TL*, 48). Una Chaudhuri takes this interpretation one step further, saying that "the play's opening sequence is devoted to evoking a spatial paradigm characterized by its shifting positions on two related axes, one of safety and danger, the other of desire and fear."<sup>150</sup> That matrix of safety and danger, of desire and fear is, for the villagers, Pegeen Mike's pub, just as for the audience it is the Abbey Theatre. True for both the pub and the theatre, the entire play is set within its confines, and most of the violent action occurs outside its doors (and thus off stage).

Only the *discussion* of violence occurs inside. Pegeen repeatedly complains that her father will be leaving her "lonesome these twelve hours of dark" with her "own teeth rattling with the fear." Specifically, she fears the "harvest boys with their tongues red for drink, and the ten tinkers. . . camped in the east glen, and the thousand militia . . . walking idle through the lands" (*PWW*, 120). The migrant workers and the "tinkers" or gypsies are loci for fear because of their strangeness – their newness to the community and the transience they represent, just as Synge's play and its offering of comic satire is

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<sup>150</sup> Una Chaudhuri, "The Dramaturgy of the Other: Diegetic Patterns in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*," *Modern Drama* 32 (1989), 374.

a stranger to the audience expecting overt nationalist symbolism and though it is not actually a threat, it is perceived as fearful. However, since no real fear is shown when the stranger Christy enters the pub, the real locus of fear for the villagers, just as it is for the audience members, must be the British garrison of soldiers who walk “idle through the lands.” Everyone fears the law, the British imposed imperial law that “becomes the representation of a paradigmatic oppressed society, the occupied territory, a world in which the normal relation of the individual to the law enforcement institutions is reversed” (*TL*, 48). The flexible laws applied capriciously at the whim of the bored “peelers” and soldiers who surround the pub (and the theatre, and Ireland itself) influence the sense of safety of everyone.

Of course, there are other things to fear besides the British. Shawn is afraid of everything, especially Father Reilly and the Catholic Church, and the impropriety that might be inferred from his staying the night within Pegeen’s home without her father present to chaperone. Ireland is a country bullied by its religion, be it in the form of church alliances that divide rather than unify the Irish people, or in the repression of individual thought and expression that both the Catholic and the Protestant churches have enforced on the arts. The Irish are controlled by the law handed down by parliament, but they are also controlled by the law handed down from the pulpit.

In addition, Ireland is a land of superstition and gossip. Before Christy enters the pub, Shawn hears him in the ditch, “groaning wicked like a maddening dog,” and uses the experience as a misguided effort to comfort Pegeen by explaining that she truly has something to fear (*PWW*, 119). At the time of the early performances of the *Playboy*,



the Easter Rising is still nearly a decade away, and the validity of a nationalist agenda is in constant debate. Who really loves Ireland and what action should be taken to express that love is not concrete. Instead, it is always open to public interpretation and the fear that comes with the possibility of having one's individual self be publicly declared null. Synge personifies these ethereal fears in the superstitions of the western country folk. As Ito has recorded, the play is set in Mayo. The etymology of the word Mayo is from the Irish magh and eo, which means "plain of the yew."<sup>151</sup> "The yew is the symbol of death and pagan religion" (*NCC*, 95). Therefore Synge sets the play in a location where death is both superstition and genuine threat, and where beneath the surface of Catholic faith lies a paganism that anthropomorphizes everything into objects of fear, including the thought of being crazy for being afraid. In fact, when Michael tries to make Shawn stay with Pegeen in an effort to assuage her fear and free him to drink heavily at the evening wake, Shawn screams "Leave me go, Michael James, leave me go, you old Pagan, leave me go, or I'll get the curse of the priests on you, and of the scarlet-coated bishops of the courts of Rome" (*PWW*, 121). The world in which these western peasants live is one where the dead walk at night, faeries and shanachie are actual, rather than imaginary threats, and even the religious figures are capable of curses. And in a city where Wolfe Tone and Brian of Beru constantly haunt the consciences of poseur revolutionaries, a place where even wildly popular radical leaders can be condemned and their careers ruined by the Church, Dublin is not so different from the small town in Mayo. The concept of morality for both is relative to the concept of safety – acts are

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<sup>151</sup> John Field, *Place-Names of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: David & Charles, 1980), 114.

justified if they lead to the protection of the individual against the threats of the unknown external world.

Hence, the townspeople's approval for Christy's act of parricide is most likely not an official approval of an individual killing one's father. Rather, the initial respect with which Christy is addressed is inspired by the same characteristics that embarrassed and confused the audience. Both are feelings verbalized by the powerless for one who seems to have exhibited some power – not so much against his father, but against the overriding legal system that will punish Christy if he is caught, and the religious system that will continue to punish Christy after his death. In fact, the play makes it clear that Christy's newfound friends are as heavily invested in keeping Christy a hero as the audience is in vilifying him. Immediately after Michael reminds Christy that his is a “hanging offense,” he indicates that Christy “should have a good reason for doing the likes of that” (*PWW*, 125). Christy's gift is not that of physical virility or aggressive violence. The audience doesn't witness any exhibition of true bravery on his part until the final scene of the play (and then Christy himself is as surprised as anyone in the change that's come over him). In addition, Christy's gift is not one of being a convincing liar. Other than the initial lie where he claims to have buried his father, Christy primarily allows his audience, both on and off the stage, to tell his story. It's amusingly ironic, then, that Pegeen repeatedly praises Christy for his fine words, claiming that it is “not only his bravery, but his way with words that are attractive to her” (*PL*, 96). The

link between bravery, strength and poetry is one that Pegeen needs to see embodied in her new found pot-boy and champion.<sup>152</sup>

Here, then, is where the true irony of Synge's play is made evident. Christy's true gift to the villagers is that of being a scapegoat. The people in the play punish Christy, in the end, for having *not* killed his father. Like the people in the audience, they feel that the ultimate crime is lying to them. Yet "some critics have asserted that Christy is not innately poetic or creative, but rather a verbal magpie who creates stories using the speech patters and narrative forms of those around him" (*PL*, 99). It's Christy's ability repeat back to the people in the pub, and in the audience, what they fear and most desire, a hero of strength and skill of mythic power and bravery, (rather than what he actually is, a vain, easily bullied hyper-romantic child barely able to care for his own needs) that ultimately makes him the scapegoat to their anger. They crucify Christy (and Synge) for the lie they force him to tell. In a perfect reflection of the Abbey audience, Synge displays the falsehood in the fairy tale. During the second performance of the *Playboy* Willy Fay, who played the role of Christy, offered to return the money of anyone who didn't enjoy the play, if only the audience would remain quiet long enough for the play to be performed. The audience, however, responded with cries of "We don't want the money. It is a libel on the National Theatre" and "Where is the author? Bring him out,

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<sup>152</sup> It's a link well-established in Celtic folklore, such as in the stories of Finn, a primary player in the Fenian Cycle of mythology. Not only were his soldiers physically brave, part of their training was to memorize poetry. For quick reference, see <http://www.lugodoc.demon.co.uk/MYTH/MYTH04.HTM> and for Yeats and Gregory's treatment of Finn, see the above cited *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend and Folklore*. Also, *A Treasury of Irish Folklore*, Ed. Padraic Colum, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Crown, 1967).

and we will deal with him!”<sup>153</sup> The initial audience made a scapegoat of Synge, much as the characters in the play make a scapegoat of Christy, and in so doing, Synge’s message is ultimately made clear. By resting all hope in created characters, in using *only* constructed myths to define identity, Ireland has made itself the butt of its own joke. It has made lying a crime, and then demanded that its national identity be criminal.

### **The Women of the West**

Despite all popular propaganda to the contrary, the real reason for the *Playboy* riots, at least initially, had little to do with the depiction of Mayoite women. Yet the Dublin audience’s interest in attributing their riots to this part of the production demands that the issue of gender, as Synge presents it, at least be examined. During the initial performances, so much disruption occurred in the theatre that it is unlikely any of the offending phrases were actually heard. In fact, it wasn’t until the third performance that a quiet audience actually reacted to the now famous mention of the word “shift” (*PP*, 325). Despite the fact that gender issues were only integrated into the *Playboy* protests as an afterthought, the play offers an important opportunity to examine issues of gender and femininity that must be considered, if the larger question of national identity and image is to be properly addressed. The women in the world of *Playboy*, exemplified by Pegeen Mike and the Widow Quin, face especially difficult fates simply because they are rural peasant women, destined to live out their lives in isolation and subjugation. The role of women in the west and the hyper-idealized notions of gender constraint usually leveled against *depictions* of women thought to be dangerous, were both objects

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<sup>153</sup> Qtd. in Athenaide Dallett, “Protest in the Playhouse: Two Twentieth-Century Audience Riots,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 12:48 (Nov. 1996), 323; hereafter cited as *PP*.

of concern for Synge. In many of the significant characters in *Playboy*, that concern is illustrated, expressed, and at least in the case of the Widow Quin, resolved.

Since Synge was, according to numerous critics and his biographers, a feminist, in *Playboy of the Western World* he explores these problematic depictions of women through his darkly comic and satiric exploration of comedy and the lie.<sup>154</sup> George Meredith, in an essay predating Synge's *Playboy* by nearly three decades, argues that there can be no comedy if the sexes aren't considered equal. He writes:

Where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty – in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilization – there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions.<sup>155</sup>

Obviously Meredith's meaning is less radical than current definitions of feminism might prefer, but his essential point is similar to what Synge hoped to accomplish with *Playboy*, at least with respect to its depictions of gender. Once the sexes are free from the social constraints that force them into preconceived, prescribed roles, the "joy" he felt was missing from the stage could return. That joy was the play and freedom that comes with the ability to experiment with different identity constructions – even those that transgress traditional gender boundaries. The Dublin audience had become so rigid in their expectations, so controlled by their fear and insecurity, that they were unwilling to allow for any personal or artistic growth anywhere on Irish soil or in Irish theatres. Yet Synge and the Abbey realized that if that

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<sup>154</sup> Gail Finney, "The 'playgirl' of the western world: feminism, comedy, and Synge's Pegeen Mike." *Women in Theatre* (1989), 87; hereafter cited as *FCS*.

<sup>155</sup> George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1980), 1.

mentality were allowed to remain, in fact to fester and grow, the evolution of their nation would cease.

Synge's main female characters both transgress gender boundaries. Though some critics have argued that this transgression is a comment upon the degeneration of the Irish race – the lack of “manly men” – due to emigration and disease, it is more likely that Synge uses his strong female characters to further a significant theme in this and his other plays; i.e., the necessity of a free expression of sexuality. He felt that sexuality in general was removed from the Irish stage, and this led to its exclusion (or at least its seclusion) from Irish life.<sup>156</sup> He considered the emancipation of women from conventional repressive gender roles to be essential for the reintegration of sexuality back to occur, and therefore he created characters that illustrated what Finney calls the embodiment of “the clash between a sense of duty to the patriarchal establishment, whose power the Victorian era had reinforced enormously, and a desire for autonomy and equality, goals advocated with increasing influence by the contemporary feminist movement” (FCS, 87). It is only through sexual maturity that marriages function and that the human consciousness is fully expressed. In a movement invested in repopulating a famine-decimated Ireland (and a repression-decimated Dublin artistic elite), the issue of sexuality could not be ignored.

Pegeen Mike is Synge's first character in *Playboy* to obviously transgress the boundary between prescribed gender roles. Both imaginative and lonely, during all but

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<sup>156</sup> David Kieley's biography of Synge traces his series of frustrated romances and makes a convincing argument with regards to how his overly religious and repressive mother, followed by a series of unattainable, overly pious women, drove him to this innovative opinion with regards to women and sexuality. As Kiely put it, “The Theatre of Yeats and Lady Gregory owes its inception to ‘the stirring of the bones’; Synge's art springs from a stirring in the loins” (*SB*, 50).

her final appearance on stage she seems to be a strong-willed, assertive woman destined to get exactly what she wants from the men in her life. She has been raised by her father, her mother dying in childbirth, and this “has caused Pegeen to develop into a woman of unusual independence and strength of will” (*FCS*, 87). Marianne Hirsch has argued that “the powerful and celebrated nineteenth-century mother is so inhibiting a force for her daughter’s development that she needs to be removed from the fiction.”<sup>157</sup> Certainly that inhibiting force is not limited to that of daughters, as Synge’s own life illustrates. It is no accident, then, that the play is devoid of any obvious mother figures. Instead, Pegeen mothers herself. The first the audience sees of Pegeen, she is making out a list of items she will need for her wedding. Though lonely, she is perfectly capable of preparing for this momentous event, while simultaneously managing the family pub (a duty that falls to her because of her father’s alcoholism). As Ito reports, her family name is Flaherty, which comes from a Gaelic word meaning “bright ruler” (*NCC*, 97), and Pegeen does seem to rule all those who frequent her tavern except the Widow Quin, the other strong and independent female in the village. Even as Pegeen makes out the list of items she’ll require, she controls her betrothed, Shawn Keogh, reminding him “with rather scornful good humour” that he is “making mighty certain . . . that [she’ll] wed [him] now” (*PWW*, 118). She refuses to let Shawn take their marriage for granted, opting instead to enforce the idea that she is mistress of her own fate.

If her strong words were reserved only for Shawn, they could be attributed to his weak character – she could speak to him in this manner because he allowed her to do so.

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<sup>157</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Mothers and Daughters,” *Signs* 7 (Autumn 1981), 210.

However, she's willing to imperiously order around any man who enters the pub, the seat of her strength – even Christy, the famous parricide. It's Pegeen who first wrests the “truth” of Christy's crime from his mouth, and only because she threatens to “knock the head of [him] with the butt of a broom” (*PWW*, 125). In response, he begs her not to strike him, and confesses his crime. Once again the violence in the play is verbal, taking the form of a threat, rather than actual physical aggression. After that initial confession, “she proceeds throughout nearly the remainder of the play to build Christy up into a grand figure of heroic proportions” (*FCS*, 89). The women are so lonely for strong figures who satisfy their pre-created definitions of masculinity that they cannot accept the reality of what is presented them. Instead, they use the power of language, of the lie, to convince themselves that what they have is truly valuable, even if all evidence indicates to the contrary. Essentially, Pegeen develops Christy into the hero she desires – the counter-Shawn. Knowing only that he's killed his father and buried him in a potato field, she declares that “that'd be a lad with the sense of Solomon to have for a pot boy . . . if I'd that lad in the house, I wouldn't be fearing the loosed kharki cut-throats, or the walking dead” (*PWW*, 126).<sup>158</sup> The obvious irony here is threefold: (1) she knows only that Christy has murdered someone close to him, and therefore should consider him a threat rather than a means of protection; (2) in a land where the law is flexible and punishments are unfairly distributed, Pegeen would probably be better protected by a cowardly Shawn willing to work within the system, than with a murderer who has proved himself willing to thwart the system; and (3) Pegeen's ultimate fear of

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<sup>158</sup> “Kharki cut-throats” probably refers to disbanded British soldiers who would have served as interim British police at this time.



the British police, those men sent to supposedly keep order in the countryside, so overrides her other fears that a murderer in the house is far preferable to a policeman. Not only does she inform her father that he must hire Christy to work at the pub, she decides that he is strong and brave and clever enough even to protect her from the undead. His ability to do so is irrelevant. By telling herself the story, she makes it so.

After this initial point of departure from reality, Pegeen is free to interpret Christy like a poem, deciding what his characteristics mean to her and how they might benefit her life. She picks and chooses what she likes, ignoring the reality of the totality of his person, and thus ultimately sets herself up for disappointment. She views his small feet when he takes his boots off by the fire, and rather than deciding that they are feminine or weak, she “projects royal blood into his veins” (*FCS*, 89). Beyond believing Christy to be a man of “quality” and an emblem of strength and bravery, she also imagines him as virile. When he attempts to appeal to her with the unusual complement of “I wasn’t fearing you at all,” she decides that he is a lady’s man, and that he’s “said the like of that, maybe in every cot and cabin where [he] met a young girl” (*PWW*, 128). The implication is that Christy has somehow manufactured the situation to be such that he is alone with Pegeen, at night and unchaperoned, so that he might take sexual advantage of her. Yet it is Pegeen who organizes the situation by first ordering her father to hire the stranger, and then by ordering Shawn to return to his own home. Pegeen breaks the mold of fear and superstition in the small village by manufacturing for herself something of which she might be afraid, but also something she knows to be wholly controllable. In other words, Pegeen lies to herself to make herself feel powerful.

Christy also offers an opportunity for entertainment, for distraction from the dull routine of her isolated life. Through the blank canvas he offers, she can herself become an artist, designing him as her ideal work of art. Amusingly, it's the picture of a poet that she paints. Without any indication that she's correct, and much to offer a contrary opinion, she decides "If you weren't destroyed traveling, you'd have as much talk and streeleen, I'm thinking, as Owen Roe O'Sullivan or the poets of Dingle Bay, and I've heard all times it's the poets are your like, fine fiery fellows with great rages when their temper's roused" (*PWW*, 128). Despite the fact that Christy has merely answered the questions posed to him (earlier in the scene, her father commented on how "close" the stranger was, and thus quite the opposite of a man who would have much "talk and streeleen"), Pegeen has decided that he is "courageous, charming, [and] lyrically adept, in short, a true playboy in all senses of the word at the time – consummate role-player, skillful athlete or game-player, and general 'star'" (*FCS*, 89). Pegeen's lie has offered the community a hero, and herself a husband. And as the audience sees in Christy's on and off stage antics in Act III, because she has willed it to be so, she has made it so. Christy emerges from the pub, into the world, as the true "playboy" of the west.

In a sense, Pegeen gives birth to the new Christy, transitioning from a young girl on the verge of marriage to an adult woman – a mother. Yet the artistry of motherhood (and of poetry) is so censured by the Irish public that this heroic creation must, at some point, crumble. The only figure who exists outside the story, who sees and accepts Christy for who he actually is, flaws and all, is the Widow Quin. Some might argue that the Widow Quin could also be considered a mother figure, but her children have all died,

leaving her alone in her little “houseen.” Synge could have cast her as a mother figure for Pegeen, and in fact Shawn asks if he should fetch the Widow Quin to act as chaperone for Pegeen and Christy, once Christy has been hired on as pot boy, but ironically, Pegeen dismisses her as a likely chaperone because she is a “murderer” (*PWW*, 119). The details of her supposed act of murder, though, are never fully fleshed out in the play, and if she did commit a crime, it was not considered serious enough to be a “hanging offense” like Christy’s. It seems that her designation of “murderer” is more a construction of her community than of the “law,” and thus her punishment is one of banishment rather than imprisonment. Yet at the same time, the actuality of her violent past confirms just how brutal life in this area can be.

The Widow Quin is as quick to make herself essential to the play as she is to stay essential to the community from which she’s been banished. According to Nicholas Grene, the “Widow Quin is the stage-manager of the play, contriving the action, supplying information, and providing links between one scene and another.”<sup>159</sup> Indeed, Ito explains that the name Quin is derived from the Irish Conn, which means “chief,” “head,” “sense,” reason,” “intelligence,” “wisdom” and “freeman” (*NCC*, 99). The Widow Quin embodies all of those characteristics, and if she ever did occupy the role of wife and mother, that time has long since passed her. Certainly, she does not act as Pegeen’s mother. Throughout the play, the two chastise each other more like adversarial sisters and vie for the attentions of the same man, an act unusual for a mother and daughter outside of Freud’s embellished case studies. In addition, the stage directions

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<sup>159</sup> Nicholas Grene, *Synge: A Critical Study of the Plays*, (London: Macmillan, 1985), 140.

identify the Widow Quin only as “a woman of about 30,” which would hardly allow her to be much more advanced in age than Pegeen herself (*PWW*, 117). The disparity in age between husbands and wives in the west is illustrated here. And British rules of inheritance and the diaspora are responsible for this frequently-seen disparity. What is unusual about *Playboy*, however, is that rather than focus on marriage and its benefits, Synge chooses to highlight the unfortunate situation of women so often left unhappy, unfulfilled, and eventually widowed by a system that keeps them trapped within the home, married to men chosen for economic reasons, rather than for love. The lie of the domestic strength of the Irish peasant home is illustrated by the Widow Quin’s mere existence, an artistic construct, but also a physical body on stage to supplant the previously misguided iconic representations.

What characterizes the Widow Quin as Synge’s ideal creation, her flexibility and interpretive character, also means that she can often be misunderstood. Critical readings of the play have construed the Widow Quin as old and ugly, conflating her with the Widow Casey, the woman who was “a walking terror from beyond the hills, and . . . two score and five years, and two hundredweights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and . . . a woman of noted misbehaviour with the old and young” (*PWW*, 137). The Widow Casey was the woman Christy tells the cadre of Mayo girls that his father wanted him to marry. Whether the story is true and the father desires the widow’s money, or the account is simply another fabrication to win the further favor of the girls, cannot be discerned from the text. However, the Widow Quin is very different. According to Christy at the end of Act I, “its great luck

and company won for me in the end of time – two fine women fighting for the likes of me” (*PWW*, 133). In other words, she is comparable to Pegeen in beauty. In fact, she is Pegeen’s only real rival for Christy’s favors, because like Pegeen she is an independent woman with financial assets as well as physical affection to offer the young man.

Moreover, she possesses something that Pegeen does not – sexual knowledge. As a woman once married, she would no longer be a virgin. Beyond this initial experience, she has lived in and therefore understands the “real” world, the world beyond the protective home of her birth family. As James Pierce writes, after burying her children and her husband, “the Widow knows the cruelty of the world and she knows her prospects in that world.”<sup>160</sup> This knowledge has made her a character unique from all the others displayed in the play. She is “the only person in the play capable of real sympathy” because she is “free of the superficialities of the other inhabitants of the village . . . [and] possesses an ironic sense of humor denied to those who believe in their own fantasies.”<sup>161</sup> In essence, she is the antithesis of the Victorian ideal of femininity, as well as of the Dublin theatre audience. She tends her own farm, keeps her own home, and readily admits a need for sexual attention. She tells Christy that “when you see me contriving in my little gardens. . . you’ll swear the Lord God formed me to be living lone, and that there isn’t my match in Mayo” (*PWW*, 132). Indeed, she is correct in her assessment. She is unique in Mayo, Synge suggests, because exactly those qualities that make her an outcast in her community, her independence, her strength, and her sexual

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<sup>160</sup> James C. Pierce, “Synge’s Widow Quin: Touchstone to the *Playboy*’s Irony” *Eire-Ireland* 16:2 (Summer 1981), 122; hereafter cited as *SWQ*.

<sup>161</sup> Bernard Laurie Edwards, “The Vision of J.M. Synge: A Study of *Playboy of the Western World*,” *English Literature in Transition* 17 (1974), 8.

knowledge, are exactly what makes her Christy's (or anyone's, for that matter) ideal mate. She doesn't *need* Christy as a blank canvas upon which she can paint her fantasies. Rather, she *wants* him, simply for company, and company is something he can provide by being exactly who he is, which is *not* a murderer.

Her independence and her "warmly humorous curiosity" make her, in all senses of the term, an outsider – even though this community is the one to which she belongs (*SWQ*, 125). As Pierce writes, "the Widow knows the cruelty of the world and she knows her prospects in the world, but her experience and her knowledge have not made her bitter. Rather, they have made her the most compassionate, the most sympathetically human of all the people in this western world" (*SWQ*, 126). The Widow Quin, then, exhibits exactly the message Synge attempted to communicate to his audience. Fooling oneself with pristine false images, not only accepting but creating comforting lies, leads to an ignorance that can only result in weakness. The Widow, on the other hand, is knowledgeable, and that knowledge makes her kind, self-sufficient, and resilient. Even when she learns that Christy is a fool, she manages to protect herself. If she is to lose Christy as company, she makes sure she will benefit financially. She deals first with Shawn and then with Christy himself so that if he insists on marrying Pegeen, the Widow will receive tribute. This materialism is not, however, the cruel negation of humanity the other characters portray. The Widow demonstrates a flexibility that allows her to in every situation make sure that she, herself, benefits, but not at the expense of others. If Christy and Pegeen insist on being together, then they will be happy and she

will be wealthy. If Shawn insists on having Pegeen, then he will rejoice in his victory, and the Widow Quin will be monetarily compensated.

The Widow Quin's "vastly more experienced view extends the boundaries of reality" and morality, "beyond the shallow vision, the romantic fantasies, of the rest of Mayo" and even beyond that of the Dublin audience (*SWQ*, 127). As her foil, Pegeen is the ultimate insider. In fact, where the Widow Quin is exiled to a little house on a neighboring hill, Pegeen lives and works at the local pub, the center for social interaction and activity. Where the Widow Quin has been married before, and thus has known life both dependent upon a husband, and a life wholly independent, Pegeen has spent her life caring for her father and for the customers of the pub. Finney has argued that this role, coupled with her initial willingness to marry the highly unattractive Shawn Keogh, demonstrates Pegeen's subservience to the patriarchal social structure within which she lives – despite her strong words and supposedly hot-tempered personality. Finney writes that at the time the play opens, Pegeen is "actually under the sway of four fathers: her own, his delegate Shawn, Father Reilly, and the Holy Father whose deputy he is" (*FCS*, 88). The Widow Quin, then, is Synge's image of the ideal female, and the ideal icon for the new Irish identity. She is female, independent, realistic, and willing to use the lie to her favor, but never to hurt others or to fool herself.

Pegeen's loss at the end of the play, her claim that she's "lost the only playboy of the Western World," is Synge's irony in its highest form (*PWW*, 166). Though he teases the audience with some of the trappings of tragedy, Synge has written a comedy, and comedies, by definition, end in marriage. Immediately preceding her claim of loss,

Pegeen tells Shawn to leave her sight, but just prior to her dismissal of Shawn, she demonstrated for the audience how quickly her mind changes when it comes to romantic matters. More than likely, Shawn is correct in his assessment when he says, “It’s a miracle Father Reilly can wed us in the end of it all, and we’ll have none to trouble us” (*PWW*, 166). Pegeen needs a husband, a real husband (and not a manufactured hero), and Shawn is there to offer himself to her. Christy was not a Christ figure, but instead a catalyst. For the people in this small town, as well as for the people in the audience, Christy acts as both a vehicle for their desires and as a scapegoat upon which they can vent their frustration and anxiety over their helplessness, without fear of punishment.<sup>162</sup> In the end, no one actually loses – Christy ascends to manhood, Old Mahon grins wildly and declares himself “crazy again,” the Widow Quin benefits financially, and Pegeen and Shawn make a fine marriage match. For the audience, the play provides a catharsis – an opportunity to voice objections to the identity constructions they’ve been forced to assume, and the growing pains that future identity constructions will require that they endure.

The real lesson of the *Playboy* is one that might be lost on the members of the small Mayo community (other than the Widow Quin, who probably never needed to learn the lesson in the first place), and definitely was lost on the first audiences in the Abbey. A modern analysis of the play and the audience’s initial reaction shows that in the search for national identity, icons are necessary. Symbols must be used to unify the disparate population into a single amalgamated nation as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* did, so

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<sup>162</sup> Rene Girard explores this idea in *The Scapegoat*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986).



efficiently. At the same time, however, those symbols cannot be absorbed to the exclusion of difference. They must be accepted as what they are – representations of ideals and not of universal truths. If they are taken to be the latter, they can only transform into lies. And while symbols can be used to invigorate, they can also be used to subjugate, because they imply that any difference, any variation from the established depiction, must be vilified. Without a tolerance for difference the new Irish nation would be destined to be as repressive as the old colonial state. Hence, the nation must be allowed, must be *forced* to see itself as it really is – a collection of fallible, imperfect, often laughable and sometimes lonely people who, despite their faults and shortcomings, deserve to rule their own destinies, independently, as a nation.

## CHAPTER V

### THE POST REVOLUTION<sup>163</sup> ABBEY AND LENNOX ROBINSON

In 1909, due in large part to substantial support and encouragement from W.B. Yeats, Lennox Robinson became the youngest director-manager in the history of the Abbey Theatre. At twenty-three, Robinson had very little on his resume to support Yeats's decision, but despite a rocky beginning, Robinson quickly became a valiant, if unsung, defender of the Abbey Theatre and a man substantially responsible for its enduring success. He assumed his post at a time when, according to Declan Kiberd, "Irish writers sought . . . to reconnect realism and romanticism in a single moment,"<sup>164</sup> and for Robinson this reconnection would take the form of a mixture of "poetry of speech" and "humdrum fact."<sup>165</sup> This blending of poetry and history, of creative progression and historical regression, yielded a combination that was often labeled "nostalgia," a trope which was at the heart of Robinson's practice as a writer and manager of Ireland's national theatre.<sup>166</sup> Theatrical nostalgia, however, was a unique and essential step forward for Ireland in its journey towards a coherent (or at least

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<sup>163</sup> The plays discussed later in this chapter skirted the date when Ireland earned its independence from England by a treaty signed in 1921. *The Whiteheaded Boy* was first performed in 1916 and *The Big House* was first performed in 1926. Dates of biographical information regarding Lennox Robinson will in some cases predate and in other cases postdate the signing of that treaty, but the entire process of personal and artistic evolution for Robinson should be considered a part of the revolution of Ireland against England, and the resulting questions of identity that the revolution made necessary.

<sup>164</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), 280.

<sup>165</sup> Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (London: Methuen, 1939), 60.

<sup>166</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines nostalgia as a "sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, especially one in an individual's own lifetime; also sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past." This definition will serve as a basis for my exploration of the term, but the following pages and their exploration of Robinson's life and two of his plays should serve to expand this definition and make it more pertinent to a discussion of the evolution of national identity.

accommodating) notion of national identity.<sup>167</sup> Though on the surface Robinson seemed to be relying on old themes, he was actually helping to crystallize a more expansive and progressive concept of national identity through this enactment of nostalgia – in effect, remaking a love for the old into a thirst for the new.

In order to accomplish this goal, he had to battle constantly mutating social forces and the artistic evolution of his mentor. According to Yeats, “Ireland was to be a holy land full of holy symbols, not in the orthodox clergyman’s sense but in the poet’s sense, which was also the mystic’s sense.”<sup>168</sup> But Robinson was the Abbey’s business manager – not its artistic icon – and therefore he had to deal with a paying audience whose definition of “holy” – religious or no – proved to be inconsistent. In order to balance the needs of the nation with the needs of his mercurial mentor and his functioning theatre, Robinson had to marry commercial success with national meaning, and find a way to expand the definition of memory and the past for a constantly evolving post-revolutionary Ireland.

### **Robinson’s Activist Nostalgia**

Robinson both benefited from and suffered for his role as “head” of the Abbey. He was able to give an authenticity to a form of Irish identity, that of the Protestant Ascendancy separatist, that until his time had been considered invalid. At the same time, his attention to the Abbey’s fiscal matters and his unwillingness to adhere blindly to the

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<sup>167</sup> Terms such as “nation” and “identity” are slippery, especially in the case of the Irish republic at this point in history. In the past several chapters I’ve given a number of instances of political and social movements to establish a nation state independent from England, but I’ve also discussed the problem artists faced who were forced to mirror back to their audiences what it “felt like” to embody an Irish nationalist identity. These terms still remain slippery, and perhaps that slipperiness is part of the answer to the question of what is meant by Irish nation/nationalism and Irish identity.

<sup>168</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: Norton, 1978); hereafter cited as *MM*,

artistic and political desires of his employers kept him precariously positioned on the point of dismissal. Robinson's second tenure at the Abbey has been virtually ignored by critics<sup>169</sup> despite his years of service, as well as his substantial volume of work. This neglect stems, in part, from the fact that Robinson's plays (both those he authored and those he produced) appear less *avant-garde* than the products of his Abbey partners, as well as Irish theatrical offerings at non-Abbey (and non-Irish) venues from "Irish" artists who didn't even reside in Ireland.<sup>170</sup> Robinson's career, however, though marked by mistakes, misunderstandings, and missed chances, is striking for its resilience in the face of adversity.<sup>171</sup> Though few Irish writers who were so prolific labored under such anonymity and lack of public appreciation, Robinson managed to contribute to almost every aspect of Irish theatrical life. Therefore, Robinson is an ideal example of the uncomfortable identity-position shared by many of the Protestant Ascendancy – and as a consequence, exemplifies the two sides of being privileged.

Analogously, the Ascendancy enjoyed the freedom of (comparative) economic prosperity and colonial legal protection. However, for revolutionary purposes, the Ascendancy was also a political and artistic scapegoat, used by the Irish theatre to

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<sup>169</sup> The substantial lack of criticism available on Robinson plays bears witness to this lack of critical interest. 11 sources on Robinson (including some that are wholly bibliographical) are currently available through the MLA International Database. When compared to the 3407 available for W.B. Yeats, the division becomes especially clear.

<sup>170</sup> See, for instance, the plays written by Samuel Beckett – Irish by birth, but self-exiled to France and the US for most of his creative life.

<sup>171</sup> He faced adversity both politically and artistically. Examples of each include his dismissal from his first position as director of the Abbey for failing to close the theatre after the death of King George, and his later dismissal from the Carnegie Library Trust's Advisory Committee for publishing a story entitled "The Madonna of Slieve Dun." Published in *To-morrow* magazine in 1924, it told the tale of a young girl who is raped by a tramp and imagines herself to be another Madonna. See Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class and Irishness* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 139; hereafter cited as *YN*. Robinson eventually served a total of two tenures as manager of the Abbey Theatre, the first from 1909-1914, and the second from 1919 (first as manager and then as a board member) until his death in 1958.

represent a new type of stage Irishman – i.e., an Irish face on the English enemy. Theatrical productions celebrated highly fictional western peasants, idealized for both their piety and their suffering. The villain in these nationalist dramas had to be England, but England was located on a completely “other” island. The Ascendancy represented the English *in* Ireland. Robinson, a man whose pedigree prohibited him from easily falling into any one political, religious, or economic category, found himself in a unique position – one where he could read the nostalgic western peasant dramas and recognize their inconsistencies, but at the same time could espy their revolutionary necessity and their fiscal popularity.<sup>172</sup> Hence, he was forced to form his own artistic sensibilities according to the dictates of a constantly shifting Yeats, a continuously turbulent political scene, and a notoriously rancorous set of critics. Balancing his responsibility to the theatre with his interest in his craft, Robinson eventually developed a style incorporating a type of nostalgia different from the dramas focused solely on the plight of the western peasant. This new nostalgia could at least unify the audience in its appreciation for a time less unstable, while at the same time validating roles that had previously been vilified. Consequently, he added a new layer to the constantly developing definition of Irish identity.

While Yeats continuously tried on new personalities, cyclically and purposefully donning costumes and ideologies as suited his tastes and needs at the moment, Robinson’s experience was more like Ireland’s itself – where Yeats chose to assume

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<sup>172</sup> Regarding *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, for instance, Robinson said the play “made more rebels in Ireland than a thousand political speeches or a hundred reasoned books.” In his *Curtain Up* (London: Michael Joseph, 1942), 17.

different identities, Robinson had his forced upon him.<sup>173</sup> His position as protégé, resident whipping boy and lame-duck leader left him in the opposite position to that of Yeats. Robinson could share this experience of imposed identity with his nation, with Ireland. Different minds worked to “create” him, and different minds didn’t always agree. His public persona was a creation of the Abbey Theatre founders who often disagreed on the effect they wished to have, just as they differed concerning their vision of the nation.<sup>174</sup> This condition, coupled with his politically charged association with and affinity for “nostalgia,” indicates that a process more complicated than simple identity-reflection was being performed at the Abbey at this time. Robinson was instrumental in turning the disruptive nostalgia of the revolutionary play into something more productive – a mirror that might offer a reflection so telling that it could force the audience to a greater level of acceptance and stability. For Robinson, theatrical nostalgia served to produce a version of Ireland’s history that would justify its journey beyond national independence and the creation of a Republican state, while also allowing for a more progressive and pragmatically varied definition of what it meant to be an Irishman.

As Kimberly Smith argues, nostalgia can be seen as “an important weapon in the debate over whose memories count and what kinds of desires and harms are politically

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<sup>173</sup> See, for instance, R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, Vols. 1 & 2 (New York, Oxford UP, 1997 & 2003); hereafter cited as *YL*. Also, *MM* and A. Norman Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography* (New York: Continuum International, 2001) for discussions of Yeats’s experimentation with different public identities, theosophy, automatic writing, etc.

<sup>174</sup> The intention of the early Abbey theatre to be pedagogical, to instruct the audience on what it meant to be “Irish” in an environment of constantly evolving national identity, has been discussed in an earlier chapter.

relevant.”<sup>175</sup> She explains that nostalgia can be a derogatory term, used to reference “a reality-distorting emotionalism triggered by thoughts of home . . . an understandable but destabilizing force infecting our politics with irrationality, unreality and impracticality” (*MN*, 507). Certain examples of this type of nostalgia, such as Lady Gregory’s *The Gaol Gate* and Padraic Colum’s *The Land*, were used to oversimplify highly complex and multi-faceted political and national conflicts.<sup>176</sup> Conversely, though, nostalgia can be associated with pride. As Adam Smith states, “emotions are not simply brute, unrationalized psychic phenomena; they also have a cognitive, public, and justificatory dimension.”<sup>177</sup> In other words, the emotional connection one feels when waxing nostalgic is not wholly imaginary. Like pride, nostalgia has an object, and though the object might be a creation, the gesture is real. That reality, then, has tangible implications that can lend themselves to either positive or negative results. Thus, what could be dismissed as Robinson’s “mere nostalgia” might actually be a subjection to or, more likely, a harnessing of a complicated political tool.

Benedict Anderson has argued that individuals instinctively seek to form communities, i.e., families, ethnicities, and nations, and frequently the lines along which those delineations are drawn are arbitrary. They are lines creatively penciled in, in order to “comfort” rather than to “create.” Somehow a sense of separation, a wall, helps give

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<sup>175</sup> Kimberly Smith, “Mere Nostalgia: Notes on a Progressive Paratheory,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3:4 (2000), 507; hereafter cited as *MN*.

<sup>176</sup> *The Gaol Gate* is a very short, one act play focusing on the pathos of two mothers as they walk to the gate of the jail where, for crimes stemming from revolutionary actions, their sons await execution. *The Land* celebrates the Wyndham Act of 1903 that encouraged landlords to sell their estates to their tenants, a piece of legislation, it was hoped, that would end tenant farming in Ireland. Later, though, it was commonly perceived to be an effort on the part of the English government to quell the Irish rebellion through perceived “kindness.”

<sup>177</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), 16.

an individual the agency necessary to re-form into a unified whole, regardless of how individual selves decide to name that whole. Nostalgia, first and foremost, incorporates a bittersweet longing for things in the past – bitter because it is lost, but sweet because (though present only in memory) the object of the nostalgia is desirable. Incorporated within the concept of nostalgia is the experience of loss. Moreover, nostalgia must be felt for something *desirable* that is perceived *as already lost*. Here is where personal feelings of desire and loss intersect with politically charged notions of community. It is a group dynamic that identifies valid objects of desire, and it is through community-defined terms that one understands the concept of loss. In other words, as Kimberly Smith notes, “nostalgia is bounded by a loose consensus as to what constitutes the proper content of nostalgic longing” (*MN*, 508).

The idea of homesickness, a localized version of nostalgia,<sup>178</sup> demonstrates itself to be a particularly Irish problem. For colonized countries, the notion of home and homeland is complicated. This Irish trouble with defining “home,” complicated further by the Revival’s resurrection of a wholly created, nostalgic past (the Celtic Twilight), offered Robinson the background in front of which his plays were set. By validating nostalgia, though, the Abbey Theatre also established itself as the only authoritative arbiter of what could be considered worthy *of* nostalgia – in other words, it decided whose past counted enough to be included in their newly created national history. It was Robinson’s burden, then, to work within these defining constructs – dramatic constructions that, whether recognized as acceptable or inherently wrong, sold tickets. It

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<sup>178</sup> In its root sense, nostos-algia, nostalgia literally means home sickness or ache for home.



was Robinson's *political* act to manipulate the resulting nostalgia – to simultaneously ameliorate and subvert the parties in power in order to allow for other memories, other homes and other forms of nostalgia to be considered valid and right.

Nostalgia is a complicated concept that can be positive and unifying, but it can also be both negative and divisive. Nostalgia can be an irrational longing for some irrevocable, unrecoverable past, a past that exists only as the fantastic construct of a mind dissatisfied with its present circumstances, longing to believe that something better, somewhere, once existed. For Ireland at the time of its independence, irrevocability would have been, at the very least, a concept of some importance. Ending 800 years of colonization, setting up a new system of government and defining a relationship between the varied members of the new community all would have made irrevocability of primary significance. Nostalgia emerged from both the fear of and hope for an irrevocable condition. If the past is irrevocable, then it's lost forever. At the same time, an irrevocable past is unchangeable despite the forces that might seek to destroy it. Importantly, Robinson's nostalgia gained power from its ability to overcome the necessity of irrevocability through a process of creation. A lost home can be compensated for by its re-creation in memory. In other words, a created memory can be made permanent by the individual's hope for it, by the use of the past to define both the present and the future. The danger comes in negotiating the political implications of recognizing memory as mutable. The public needed to be taught that this power could unify the nation while simultaneously dividing it from its colonizers.

Nostalgia, then, if used correctly, can function as a type of community construction. It can be a group decision that “represent[s] a set of politically charged claims about community, memory, and harm” (*MN*, 508). The notion of homesickness offers a small-scale illustration of how nostalgia is politically created and influenced. It is the group dynamic of the family and the social recognition of what can be construed *as* a “family” that provides the foundation for homesickness. Control of personal identity and movement take on an especially high premium if one feels excluded from the sphere of influence – when away from home, or when home has lost its sense of rooted meaning. Therefore, a group identification with a home (or as an extension, a homeland) which is validated by a community’s acceptance and recognition of that home/land is essential to the personal and group identity that inspires the nostalgia. Only through the loss and subsequent recreation of that home, can one be nostalgic for it.

As has been stated above, irrevocability can offer hope. At the same time, however, a method often-used to access that irrevocability is the sentimental.<sup>179</sup> The sentimental is the extravagant, the self-indulgent and almost always excessively emotional representation of hope itself – not respectable, tangible, civically responsible hope for a concrete solution to corporeal problems, but rather a poetic, romantic hope for the *intangible*, for the past created through memory and embellished through imagination. Thus the difficulty Robinson faced with his use of nostalgia is the same problem Yeats faced with *The Countess Cathleen* and Synge faced with *The Playboy of the Western World*. Nostalgia can be misused to provide an inaccurate identity

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<sup>179</sup> For a discussion of American fiction that deals with the topic of sentimentality, see Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).

framework because it costumes itself as accurate history, a re-presentation of the past. Yet it cannot be forgotten that nostalgic memories are actively created in, and thus affected by, the present. One reason Robinson would have been especially well situated to navigate the Abbey along the tenuous path of nostalgia is that Robinson, himself, was a study in displacement.

### **Robinson's Life in the Theatre**

Robinson was born in October of 1886 in County Cork, the youngest of seven children in a staunchly Protestant, Anglo-Irish (and thus, Unionist) family. According to Christopher Murray, however, he “could not be said to have belonged to the Ascendancy . . . [His family] was inevitably marginalized by the economic and political evolutions which swept through Irish society following the death of Parnell.”<sup>180</sup> Perhaps it was this quality of *half*-belonging that first attracted the young writer to W.B. Yeats, who himself had been Anglo-Irish and had also faced poverty<sup>181</sup> in his youth. While Yeats's poverty stemmed in large part from his father's insistent mismanagement of the family's finances and of his own career, Robinson's was primarily due to the social and political climate of the time.

Comparing Yeats and Robinson emphasizes their different perspectives, but also indicates why Robinson's effect on the Abby might have taken a different (but no less

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<sup>180</sup> Christopher Murray, “Lennox Robinson, *The Big House*, *Killycreggis in Twilight* and ‘the Vestigia of Generations,’” *Ancestral Voices: The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature*, Ed. Otto Rauchbauer (Hildesheim: Olms, 1992), 109; hereafter cited as *LRB*.

<sup>181</sup> See *YL* for a discussion of the always precarious financial situation of the Yeats family during W.B.'s youth. It is important to draw a distinction, though, between the genteel and bohemian poverty of the Yeats or Robinson family and the truly life-threatening destitution of someone like O'Casey who grew up in the Dublin slums.

important) form.<sup>182</sup> Like John Butler Yeats, Robinson's father went out of his way to put the family in financial crisis. He was at one point a stockbroker in Cork, and made enough money to keep the family firmly planted in the middle class (*LRB*, 109). However, at the age of fifty, he then decided to give up his practice and join the clergy of the Church of Ireland, thus severely limiting the family's future financial security. Both men, then, had fathers who placed personal and intellectual growth above economic prosperity and defied standard social practices and definitions. Both men would have been nostalgic for a time when they felt secure, and Yeats obviously channeled that insecurity into a national effort at independence with himself at the artistic helm. Robinson, though, wasn't as able to embody that thinking, and found himself in a much different and more profoundly nostalgic state. Where Yeats was encouraged by Lady Gregory to ascend to adulthood, to direct his and the nation's identities in a way he personally sought fit, Robinson had Yeats for a surrogate father, one who actively worked to keep his protégé dependent.<sup>183</sup> Instead of progressing beyond his homesickness, then, Robinson was forced to make it work in his favor.

As has been discussed a previous chapter, the Abbey, too, was forced to blend categories, taking patronage from the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy (usually understood to be Unionist) while proclaiming itself the new "Irish" (and therefore nationalist) theatre.

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<sup>182</sup> As has been discussed in previous chapters, a number of other individuals have had their own unique and substantial impacts on the formation of the Abbey Theatre, such as Lady Augusta Gregory. For other perspectives see Lennox Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1951) and Adrian Frazier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

<sup>183</sup> For a discussion of Lady Gregory's influence over W.B. Yeats, see Chapters I-III of this research. Also, YL cited above, Lady Isabella Gregory, *Lady Gregory's Journals: The Coole Edition* (London: Smythe, 1987) and Mary Lou Kohfeldt, *Lady Gregory: The Woman Behind the Irish Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

The consequence was that these men were blends of their Anglo-Irish educations and their western Irish economic and social exposure. Both men, too, grew up somewhat isolated from their siblings. While Yeats's isolation had a good deal to do with economics, as well as his frequent trips to Sligo where company was scarce, Robinson was sickly as a child, and thus limited in his social interaction. To entertain himself he developed a love for literature and music, and upon reaching adulthood, he pursued teaching. According to Kurt Eisen and other biographers, however, a trip to the Cork Opera House in 1907 decisively shifted Robinson's rural life of teaching to one of an urban and international career in the theatre arts.<sup>184</sup> His family did not oppose his move to the Abbey, or his dramatic change in career. Perhaps, as Murray argues, this liberality can be explained by defeatism, an idea that their social class had already lost any hope of claiming a role in post-revolutionary Ireland akin to that which it held in the pre-revolution centuries.<sup>185</sup> Robinson would later address this sense of defeatism in his plays such as *The Big House* and *Killycreggis in Twilight*.

It would be Robinson's exposure to political drama, and specifically to W.B. Yeats, that would initiate him, as one of the most instrumental men in Irish theatre, into what would become the consuming passion of his career, and a constructing force in the

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<sup>184</sup> Kurt Eisen, "Lennox Robinson: (1886-1958)," *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, Eds. Bernice Schrank & William Demastes (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 308; hereafter cited as *LR*. Numerous other biographers (including those listed above) also refer to the importance of this event.

<sup>185</sup> Christopher Murray, "Lennox Robinson: The Abbey's Anti-Hero," *Irish Writers and the Theatre*, Ed. Masaru Sekine (Totowa, NJ: Smythe, 1986).

Irish theatre. Yeats's power over Robinson is well documented<sup>186</sup> and from Robinson's perspective, "his first formal meeting with William Butler Yeats in 1909 was the most fortunate event of his life" (CS, 69).<sup>187</sup> Within two months, Robinson began work on *The Clancy Name*, his first drama (which was also the first of his plays to be accepted for production at the Abbey), and he completed and produced two more plays in 1909. One of these, *The Crossroads*, was also accepted for production at the Abbey, and the other was produced in his home county of Cork. It was early in the very next year, 1910, that Yeats offered Robinson the position of producer-director at the Abbey. Though the appointment surprised Lady Gregory and gave her great cause for concern, Yeats demonstrated substantial faith in Robinson's early work.<sup>188</sup> Months before Yeats and Robinson even formally met, Yeats wrote in a letter to Gregory that *The Crossroads* was very well received by the audience, and that Robinson was "a serious intellect and may grow to be a great dramatist."<sup>189</sup>

These auspicious beginnings, however, yielded an unheralded artistic life. Michael J. O'Neill, in his biography of Robinson, blames Robinson's modesty and shyness for his lack of public recognition.<sup>190</sup> Another possible source, though, is W.B. Yeats himself. Yeats's need to keep the talented young man under his control is obvious

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<sup>186</sup> For instance, Yeats once chastised Robinson for being late to a rehearsal, and Robinson was known to be obsessively punctual from that point on. See, for instance, Richard F. Peterson, "The Crane and the Swan: Lennox Robinson and W.B. Yeats," *The Journal of Irish Literature* 9(1), 69; hereafter cited as CS.

<sup>187</sup> According to Peterson, Robinson never faltered from this belief. However, for an alternative explanation for Yeats's devotion, see Brenda Maddox, *Yeats's Ghosts* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999). In her book, Maddox investigates the longstanding friendship between Robinson and George Yeats, and includes excerpts from letters that show Robinson's devotion to Yeats's wife.

<sup>188</sup> Gregory's response to Robinson's appointment is commented upon by biographers of both Robinson and Yeats (see those listed above) as well as in Gregory's journals. These journals, ironically, were later edited for publication by Robinson.

<sup>189</sup> *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, Ed. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 527.

<sup>190</sup> Michael J. O'Neill, *Lennox Robinson* (New York: Twayne, 1964).

throughout Robinson's career. Though Yeats showed an early respect for Robinson's work, he also showed a great deal of disrespect for the man, actually "initiat[ing] the impression that Robinson hardly deserved his position within the Abbey's inner circle" (CS, 70). Gossip from the time holds Yeats responsible for circulating a story that Robinson wasn't selected for his position due to any merit of his own, but rather for the shape of his head. The bizarre story goes that Yeats was sitting at the Abbey Theatre one night with Lady Gregory, and became so fascinated by the back of Robinson's head that he decided right then and there that Robinson would be the new Abbey manager (CS, 70). Of course, there is no official documentation of such an evening, and Robinson always cited his early, popular plays as the foundation for Yeats's trust in him. However, the mere circulation of such a story diminished Robinson's credibility as an artist and as a manager.

As Peterson writes, "Yeats [encouraged] the idea that like one of the ancient gods he had placed an invisible hand upon Robinson's head . . . and selected him out of the crowd for heroic duty in the service of the Abbey" (CS, 70). Their relationship smacks of the very colonialism the Abbey Theatre was trying to thwart, and their interpersonal dynamic makes Robinson's later turn to sentimental nostalgia all the more politically invested. Yet despite Yeats's famous willingness to take credit for all things Irish and artistic, Robinson eagerly demonstrated an ego (though substantially guided and inspired by Yeats) all his own. After his inadvertent political statement against the crown in 1910 that cost the Abbey the patronage of A.E.F. Horniman, as well as a financially unsuccessful American tour, Yeats's ego and reputation could not protect Robinson's

job as director-manager.<sup>191</sup> Though finally cut from Yeats's apron strings, Robinson was hardly without artistic energy or focus. In the next four years he toured the Irish countryside as the organizing librarian for the Carnegie Trust and wrote two more political dramas and a novel. In 1916 he also wrote his biggest commercial success, *The Whiteheaded Boy*, and founded the Dublin Drama League for international theater (LR, 309).<sup>192</sup> *The Whiteheaded Boy* was Lennox Robinson's sixth drama, and the product of only weeks of effort.

### **Comedy, Nostalgia and *The Whiteheaded Boy***

Robinson works out several of the implications of an active nostalgia and its relationship to the maturation of Irish identity in this overtly comic play with its underlying seriousness. The audience sees a character made responsible for the fate of a "family," regardless of what his actual aspirations might be. There is also a community inextricably tied to itself – identities dependent upon other identities that are, in turn, dependent upon others. There is a simple need for people to believe in something, and at the same time the trouble that too much mindless belief can cause. In essence, Robinson shows the audience a family of very different personalities, with different desires and different talents, all frozen in a state of adolescence, and he marks the audience as responsible for that state. As Synge had shown the world, the peasant dramas infantilized the country as much as did the "stage Irishman" of the English stages. Only

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<sup>191</sup> The above-mentioned "inadvertent political statement" refers to Robinson's now-famous refusal to close the Abbey despite Prince Edward's death. Hugh Kenner discusses the incident and what he calls Robinson's "victimization" in *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1983), 183. He also quotes Lady Gregory's reference to the event as "a storm in a chalice."

<sup>192</sup> See also Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 139; hereafter cited as *PID*.



through experience with Ireland and with the world could that state of adolescence be escaped. Robinson asks the audience to laugh with him at this frozen family, to recognize the ridiculousness of gratification deferred, and especially of gratification removed and placed wholly within the hands of another.

Though the play is now thought to be one of his greatest comedic successes, the criticism of the time seemed to rest on the complicated relationship between the play's humor, its depiction of the upwardly mobile Irish family, and a more general reference to Irish politics.<sup>193</sup> Despite the critics' dislike of the production, the play was resoundingly popular with audiences. According to Morash, the play provided "many of the same pleasures that theatre audiences had come to expect from the touring companies (a tightly constructed plot, sympathetic characters, genuinely funny situations), while at the same time filling a demand for Irish material" (*HIT*, 157-8). Thus the play negotiated a complicated line between pleasing an audience (and therefore yielding commercial success) and continuing the Abbey's mission statement of promoting "authentically" Irish plays. Robinson himself called the play "political from beginning to end," but Cruise O'Brien questioned the real motivation behind the audience's laughter (*LR*, 311).<sup>194</sup> *The Whiteheaded Boy* takes the form of a comedy of

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<sup>193</sup> According to Christopher Morash, the play represented the greatest commercial success for the Abbey at that time. By 1960 it had been staged 284 times, making it the Abbey's most frequently performed full-length play. *A History of Irish Theatre: 1601-2000* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 157; hereafter cited as *HIT*.

<sup>194</sup> The deeper meaning behind the audience's laughter is not explained, but one conclusion that could be made is that O'Brien felt that the audience was laughing at Robinson's attempt at comedy, rather than the comedic effects of his play. Robinson's earlier plays, such as *The Clancy Name*, *The Crossroads*, *Harvest* and *Patriots* were all serious, overtly nationalistic dramas. *The Whiteheaded Boy* marked a substantial change in style for Robinson, one O'Brien might have believed the audience didn't expect. As an interesting comparison, see *IPP*. Since the book was published after the dawn of Robinson's career, but prior to his shift towards comedy, the author's perspective is unique in comparison to that of more modern

errors, plotted through secrets whispered behind closed doors and misunderstandings that breed amusing antics. Beneath its simple exterior, however, lies a complex series of characters not easily characterized, with motivations too informed to be incidental. The comedic form houses serious political investments because it demonstrates the unique situation of an *Irish* family struggling with retaining what they feel to be a necessary factor of their identity. In examining that identity, Robinson also examines how those standard human characteristics mutate within the context of personal, local and national Irish politics.

If one carefully examines the dialogue in this play, it becomes evident that more is at work than a simple depiction of Irish life, or a comedic demonstration of the complicated politics of the family. Robinson employs nostalgia to critique a Revivalist ideal of Irish authenticity in a move that indicates the maturation of nationalist politics in Ireland. As do many plays of the time, *the Whiteheaded Boy* sets its action in a western peasant home, a standard location anthropologist Lawrence Taylor calls “the Gaelic *Ur-ground*.”<sup>195</sup> By his choice of location, Robinson calls upon an already established nostalgia for a past that cannot be reclaimed except in memory, memory inspired by the characters produced on stage.

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critiques. For example, he writes: “With this ability of [Robinson’s] to pick out a theme that is basic in Irish life, and with the years of bringing him an experience of life that will dominate any propagandist purpose, Mr. Robinson should grow in seriousness of intention and accomplishment. He hates sham, he has sane and cleansing satire of pretension, he writes good dialogue, his experience as stage manager of the Abbey Theatre is teaching him the stage; he is only twenty-five. Do not these things augur a future?” (*IPP*, 232).

<sup>195</sup> Qtd. in Vincent Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2004), 37; hereafter cited as *IAC*.

The peasant family, though, is not a standard Celtic Twilight family. The action makes no reference to the famine or to high rents. Instead, they are reasonably wealthy merchants. The result of this alteration is the production of a new past that authenticates the new identity being generated by the audience's viewing of the play in the present. As Cheng goes on to state, "the quest for authenticity, in a nationalist politics, frequently takes the familiar form of a national nostalgia for origins, a yearning for a premodern and uncontaminated past that somehow authorizes and defines the authenticity and essence of the cultural present" (*IAC*, 34). *The Whiteheaded Boy*, however, is not an early Abbey play in setting or in performance chronology. Rather, it revises the theatre's earlier peasant plays and, building upon the groundwork laid by Synge, introduces a new and more kinetic form of nostalgia. First opening in December of 1916, after the Easter Rising, it appeared fourteen years after *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, ten years after J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, and nine years after *The Playboy of the Western World*. Rather than offer simple nostalgia for a lost past, a past that might authenticate certain types of Irishness but exclude others,<sup>196</sup> Robinson offers an indictment of the "authentic" peasant drama, a form that produced an old nostalgia that his new play was poised to replace.

Robinson's nostalgia mixes biting characterization and thinly veiled political allegory, allegory that highlights the more repressive aspects of Irish nationalism and traditional community values. The play circulates around a family's difficult dynamic that wrestles with how and for whom the family's resources should be allocated, whose

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<sup>196</sup> For a more thorough discussion of how the process of authentication automatically leads to the marginalization or "othering" of that which is then decided to be inauthentic, see *IAC* pgs. 28-61.

happiness depends upon what family successes, and how individual identity can be formed in conjunction with, and in spite of, a family's need to act as a cohesive unit. As in many depictions of Irish family life at the time, there is a strong male family head who is *not* the biological patriarch. There are a number of children, all of whom have varying aspirations and desires. But this family does not exist within a vacuum. They feel a substantial amount of pressure from the community to portray a certain personae and to maintain that personae of middle class "respectability" at all cost. What becomes evident throughout the course of the story is that these relationships are all interdependent in their paralysis, that each individual's (stilted) identity depends upon the same identity being mirrored by the family and the community. In essence, then, the inability to embody socially uncontested personal identities (which depend so much upon environment, culture, economics, physical location, etc.) is a direct analogy for the nation's inability to solidify a successful definition of national identity. The problems that stem from efforts to concretize a sense of national identity that is both nondescript and in stasis, in turn create the social disruptions and personal obstacles that cause the embodiment of personal identities to remain elusive.

Money, as is the case with plays such as *The Countess Cathleen* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, is central to the characters' lives and choices, and therefore an important tool used by the author to comment on the theatre itself, as well as on national politics. The play brings up complex questions about financial dependence and autonomy, gender

relations and familial bonds.<sup>197</sup> The audience's information regarding this family comes from two distinct areas: (1) the dialogue exchanged by the family, and (2) a unique type of narrator who seems to be interested and omniscient, not only knowledgeable, but also highly opinionated. This narrator is described by Christopher Murray as someone who is derived "from a traditional story-teller, an acute observer but an invented persona not to be identified with Robinson himself."<sup>198</sup> Therefore, the narrator transgresses a traditional understanding of identity. He is both Robinson and not Robinson, both an "insider" in the family and external to the actions within, and most importantly an individual, but an individual without the necessary agency to affect the environment within which he resides.

Personal identity, as it is depicted on the national theatre's stage, is even more complicated when that identity is female. Negotiating the terrain between the evolution of a national persona, the demands of newfound financial power and gender politics would be especially difficult in an Irish national theatre hoping to de-legitimize the "stage Irishman" character and the general racial characterization of Ireland as feminized, and thus powerless. As Marjorie Howes writes, "By the late nineteenth century . . . the cultural equation of femininity with pathology . . . was . . . firmly established" (YN, 24).<sup>199</sup> This feminine "degeneration," coupled with the negative social

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<sup>197</sup> For an interesting discussion of the relationship between money, gender and nationality, see Neil Blackadder's discussion of O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, and the treatment of the prostitutes by the Abbey players. See, especially "A Slander on the Citizen Army!: Vindicating Fallen Heroes," *Performing Opposition: Modern Theater and the Scandalized Audience* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

<sup>198</sup> Christopher Murray, *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to a Nation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997), 116; hereafter cited as *TCL*.

<sup>199</sup> See also Linda Dowling, "The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 33:4 (1979), 434.

implications of the New Woman, independent financially and sexually free, threatened the stable “appropriate” national theatre some patrons hoped the Abbey would be.

Therefore, the play also transgresses expected roles for women on the nationalist stage by offering characters who are both Irish and female, and yet still empowered by financial independence.<sup>200</sup>

Act I begins with the narrator’s monologue, read aloud to the audience by a voice off stage. He explains that William Geoghegan, the deceased patriarch, was “a very genteel man, and when the wife brought him the house and the bit of land instead of getting a tenant for it like a sensible man...nothing would do him but live in it himself and walk down to his business every day like a millionaire” (*WB*, 65).<sup>201</sup> There are a series of women in this family who are propertied, or who have serious interests in obtaining property in ways other than through marriage.<sup>202</sup> Yet it is the men in this play

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<sup>200</sup> Though the interaction between the various characters in this play is complicated, the basic plot line is not. Denis is the most valued child of an upper middle class Irish Catholic family. Due to a mysterious whisper from a Dublin doctor, Mrs. Geoghegan has come to believe that Denis is special, due greater deference and financial benefits than the rest of her children, and that his success as a doctor will somehow lift the family from their current station into something not quite definable, but something perceived as “better.” Denis, however, gambles, drinks, and fails in his studies. He returns home after failing his medical exam for the third time to find that the family (other than his mother) has decided to stop their financial and emotional support for his pursuit of a medical career. They plan to send him to Canada, but first circulate a story they hope will allow them to retain their dignity within the community and explain the dramatic change in Denis’s fortunes. This story angers the father of Denis’s betrothed, and he threatens to sue the family for breach of contract. Key family members, in one way or another, seek to monetarily appease the father (who refuses to believe the truth – that his daughter is better off without Denis). The father takes advantage of their secrecy and eagerness to conceal Denis’s departure, but is himself humiliated when Denis and Delia (the daughter) sneak off and marry. Dennis threatens to take a day laborer’s job, thus humiliating both families, and the young couple finally consent to take the blackmail money, an important job in a neighboring county (one that was earmarked for Denis’s brother) and to leave the families with their reputations in tact. This action dooms the rest of the Geoghegan children to continue to defer any hopes of fulfilling their own dreams because, once again, Denis has received success at their expense.

<sup>201</sup> Lennox Robinson, *The Whiteheaded Boy* (New York: G.P. Putnum, 1921); hereafter cited as *WB*.

<sup>202</sup> The issue of property and ownership in colonial Ireland is itself a tenuous subject. Though some Irish peasants (especially merchants) were able to rise above the poverty of the general farming peasant, any wealth would have been substantial only in comparison to other marginalized people. The fact that all

who control the money.<sup>203</sup> It is this wrangling of money and its intersection with sexuality and power that (at least in part) encourages the problems within the Geoghegan family. The financial implications of a liberated female population also offered real points of social discord in Ireland.

Besides foreshadowing the events to come and giving some initial insight into the various characters, in the first line of the play the narrator establishes himself as one who knows the history of the town, and who is not afraid to judge. At the same time, however, there is dislocation or confusion as to the ground upon which this authoritative judging rests. A firm social bedrock upon which characters might base their identities, which would offer them a right to judge themselves and one another, is decidedly absent. Regardless, there is a great deal of judging throughout *The Whiteheaded Boy*, by both the mysterious narrator and the physical characters on the stage, all of whom offer important levels of characterization and history. The father figure, the head of this dysfunctional household, epitomizes the problematic identity formation the play explores. Primarily, he is dead, and is therefore both entity and non-entity. He represents a privileged place of power, but can no longer wield that power. Geoghegan was, during his lifetime, a landowner, but only due to his wife's inheritance. He owned a business, but was too proud to be satisfied with it alone, and instead of renting out the property he owned, despite the fact that "the whole village knew CLANCY, the vet, was

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parties existed under England's regime and in proximity to the wealthy Protestant-Ascendancy landowners frames and contextualizes the irony of these particular characters' interests.

<sup>203</sup> This fact mirrors the situation at the Abbey Theatre where Lady Gregory and Annie Horniman provided much of the early financial backing for the theater, but the acting managers of the Abbey were always men.

mad to take it,” he opted to live in it himself, exchanging the possible revenue that Clancy could have offered for the status of being the lord of his own manor (*WB*, 66).

Hence pride becomes significant in delineating the characters in the play. Pride, of course, can take many forms, including pride in one’s autonomy, pride in one’s connection to familial or national groups, or pride in one’s possessions – financial or otherwise. In beginning the play with a reference to a figure that *should* have status, as head of the household and as owner of his own home and land, but who is decidedly *without* status – he’s no more than a ghost – the audience discovers that his family’s prosperity is more pretense than reality, and thus any pride that is felt is unfounded. The family is convinced that any real hope for financial success (beyond what they have already achieved) lies with the errant eldest son who, the audience quickly discovers, is sure to disappoint. Thus Robinson strikes at the conventional idea of privilege and pride with his comedic farce ironically entitled *The Whiteheaded Boy*, which can also mean the “fair-haired child” or privileged one.<sup>204</sup> He attacks conventional pride in social status and worldly possessions and, in so doing, brings to the audience’s attention another type of pride that in the Geoghegan household is sorely missing, pride in one’s individuality. Through this absence, Robinson demonstrates the complicated connection between knowing who one is as an individual, and the effect that has on unions with others to form a family, a theatre group or nation.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> See the above-mentioned biographies for various discussions of Robinson’s quick ascent to power as manager of the Abbey, his disappointment at his discovering his figurehead status, and his quick first dismissal.

<sup>205</sup> Robinson’s travels through the countryside would have broadened his perspective to allow the importance of difference, as well as uniformity, to have an effect on his work.



The Geoghegans desperately search for the kind of pride that comes from locating oneself with regards to one's own personal identity, as well as to one's place in relationship to others and to the rest of the world. On the surface, the family has plenty about which they could be proud. Though there are practical financial concerns to consider, they do have enough to eat, furniture to sit on, and a house in which to live. Rather than force the main characters to worry about the basic necessities (as is frequently seen in other plays featuring western peasants), this drama deals with the next stage in identity construction.<sup>206</sup> Once one has what one needs, one must decide upon the relationship he or she will share with those belongings. The narrator is quick to tell the audience that the father handled this relationship incorrectly. Rather than obtain more money by renting out his property, Geoghegan decided to enjoy his property, something usually only reserved for the aristocracy. The Geoghegan father transgressed the standard definition of his social classes, but the family's response to this transgression acted as the genesis of the troubles to follow. This active identity definition is in direct contrast to that of the narrator, a character who appears powerful but is ultimately powerless. His voice permeates the play; the audience can never fully escape it. At the same time, however, he is a ghost. His commentary has no actual impact on the actions the characters take. The audience is free to find the narrator either reliable or simply comical. As a result, Robinson shows the audience that power and identity are

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<sup>206</sup> Examples of plays concerned with poverty would include Lady Gregory's *The Gaol Gate*, Padraic Colum's *The Land*, and Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says "No!"*.

intertwined with the judgment of others, but the extent to which that judgment can affect the individual is up to them.<sup>207</sup>

This narrator who sits in judgment of the family transcends the social and financial implications of their station, but this transcendence does not necessarily place the narrator in a position of power. Rather, his presence is visible only to the audience, and the extent of his power is limited to how the audience perceives him. (In other words, the “judge” is in the same predicament as those he judges.) Discerning the narrator’s identity is one of the main games Robinson plays with the audience, showing the audience a possible identity formation and then just as quickly, showing how it can be undercut. The narrator’s brogue, at least, seems to align him with the other members of the community. He is quick to interject “God rest his soul” or to speak in informal, familiar terms about the family. Regarding William’s sister Ellen, the narrator says that she had “too high notions...worse again than [William], craning after anything new she’d be like a cow through a fence” (*WB*, 65). His comments seem to imply a familiarity; he has known the family long enough to be able to compare the sister (who lives in another county) to the deceased brother. Also, there is no decorum here, or pretense of manners. His willingness to compare Ellen to a cow indicates a feeling of solidity with regards to his relationship to the family. No odd comment from him could cause him to be disbarred or excommunicated from the family itself.

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<sup>207</sup> Again, a connection can be drawn to Robinson. Though he was put “in charge” at the Abbey, his personal history placed him outside any clear delineations of financial or religious background, and his position within the Abbey itself was far from specific, with Lady Gregory constantly questioning his choices and Yeats circulating stories about the size of Robinson’s head. Therefore, Robinson was exploring his own identity with relationship to that community, just as the characters here wrestle with finding their own individual spaces within the community of the play.

Conversely, this comfort might result from his exiled status. He interjects comments throughout the play, but they aren't actually "heard" by the characters, and they have no direct effect on the stage action. The narrator is thus located in a conflicted space. He's familiar but ignored, exiled and thus powerless, but also free to speak his mind without control or punishment from those of whom he speaks. He judges and is judged, but his relationship to his own identity remains frozen, as does his relationship to the family. Power and privilege can be both positive and negative, both kinetic and paralyzing. Robinson is able to sum up in *The Whiteheaded Boy* what both *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Playboy of the Western World*, in their very different ways, attempted to do. Robinson gives the audience a character that illustrates how dangerous identity can be. Without a solid and socially accepted place in society, one is exiled to the margins and politically powerless. At the same time, too concrete an identity is a trap, forcing those inside to behave in ways wholly separate from their desires or fears.

As a foil to this masculine (yet absentee) narrator, the aunt, Ellen, alone thinks about her environment and makes conscious decisions to change it to suit her taste. She ignores social expectations and refuses to get married, choosing instead an independence that allows her monetary freedom. This financial independence also permits her to take an active role in politics, helping to plan and sponsor a People's Co-Operative in her area which will ensure a constant flow of necessary goods at reasonable prices for the members of her community. Though the idea is an innovative one, she has enough faith in herself and in the endeavor not only to bankroll it, but also to provide a position for Peter, the second oldest of the Geoghegan boys. This act demonstrates a type of

character in direct contrast to that of the rest of the family, and especially to that of the narrator, all of whom are distinguished only by their lack of action, i.e., their profound preference for waiting for Denis to succeed, or Denis to fail, or for something to propel them along life's path.<sup>208</sup>

The family evinces a characteristically fatalistic attitude and an adversarial relationship to their surroundings. This fatalism forces them into stasis. With the exception of Ellen they cannot act on their own behalf, or on the behalf of their community. In their minds only the whiteheaded boy can save them. However, the situation of the Geoghegan family would not have to be a dire one, so it is difficult to understand why the family exhibits such a profound lack of hope, a lack of confidence in their own abilities, or at least in the possibility of their own success in the world. In other words, the hopelessness presents itself as allegorical rather than narrative. The narrator explains that the patriarch's lack of frugality and untimely death left the Geoghegan family without much in the way of financial resources, but due to the industriousness of the eldest son, the family not only managed to survive, but to flourish. The eldest son was able to step into the role of breadwinner and secure his family's financial security, in addition to a reasonable selection of possessions and status within the community – enough to provide for the social and the substantive necessities of everyone in the family.

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<sup>208</sup> Aunt Ellen represents an independence Robinson must have desired, as is evidenced by his active career once he “left home” for the second time, after his dismissal from the Abbey. He searched for a place separate from but still associated with the Abbey “family” he was forced to leave behind, or at least close enough to voice his frustration with their reluctance to actually fulfill the charter's mission statement, and to be what he felt was the voice of a national Irish theatre, independent of England.

The problem with this family, finally, is analogous to what Robinson sees as the problem with Ireland. Namely, lip service has replaced social service and financial security has usurped national independence as the prime goal of the Irish people. David Krause accuses Robinson of creating a simple play, pandering to the desire of the audience to be entertained, or in other words, distracting them from the revolution raging outside the theatre's door. He claims that a "sentimental aura hangs over the play like a thick syrup that will not pour."<sup>209</sup> However, Murray claims that "it is more fruitful to look for the sneer behind the folksy narrative. For what Robinson reveals in the play is a fairly cynical accommodation with society" (*TCI*, 117). In essence, Robinson doesn't ask the audience to pity the Geohegans and their lack of advancement, or Denis's failure to secure a position as a Dublin doctor. Rather, Robinson holds a mirror up to the audience, exposing an unflattering portrait of a people wholly obsessed with financial advancement and personal social status. Their obsession, rather than motivating them to action that might further their own interests as well as those of the country, actually paralyzes them. The middle class, financially secure Geohegans use the free time their money offers them to observe pretense and pretension, the trappings of advancement, without actually advancing intellectually, geographically, or politically. Their freedom allows them the liberty of voluntary subjugation. They are so free that they willingly give up their freedom to Denis.

Hence, the family exists within a series of interrelated political/financial relationships that mimic that of the audience, and that demonstrate how a small amount

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<sup>209</sup> A further analysis of the play by David Krause can be found in *The Profane Book of Irish Comedy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982), 197.

of perceived freedom can be its own type of prison. The Geoghegans must negotiate their family politics (with a specific, internal economy directed by George, and an emotional economy directed by Mrs. Geoghegan) as well as the local economy (George runs a store and the family depends upon the townspeople offering the Geoghegans their business), and finally the political backdrop of Ireland. In response to this level of complexity, the family emerges only in terms of their relationship to one another and to the immediate community, and only on a profoundly surface level. Perceived social status usurps even personal desires or fulfillment. Individual identities are sacrificed to the social order. Other than Dennis, the whiteheaded boy, the family never ventures outside the town, or discusses issues of politics or personal desires, because their personal identities are constantly and willfully held in a state of defeated adolescence. Even the fully grown children seem to be waiting, poised and ready to leave the house but somehow sure that they will never actually do so.<sup>210</sup>

As the play proceeds, the audience bears witness to the dramatic and situational irony that define the Geoghegan family. Even as they scurry about to prepare for the whiteheaded boy's return, they lament their own fates and the sacrifices that have been required so that he could attend medical school. No mention is made as to how this decision came about. Rather, it seems to be something the family considered to be a

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<sup>210</sup> The narrator communicates all this information as both a character in the play and an outside voice transcending the time and location of the action. Robinson, too, reflecting back at his time at the Abbey, might also have felt this type of exclusion – though working hard to assume the power-identity the title of Manager should have afforded him, he simply became the mouthpiece or parrot of the inner circle and once he crossed that line, he was asked to leave. Of course, he couldn't really leave with Yeats and Lady Gregory's shadow looming over him so, like the Geoghegan children, he was destined to be tied to his "home," regardless of where he traveled or how he worked to define a separate identity for himself.

foregone conclusion. The idea that this family would be defined by their sacrifice and martyrdom simply for the hopeless pursuit of a better future (through the success of someone else) was always present. Denis, as well, had no opportunity to choose for himself what was to become of him. His entire family's ambition for some magical level of "success" that might give them a clear definition of their identity depended upon his success as a doctor. Robinson shows the audience the double-edged sword that power can be. The entire family sacrificed for Denis, but for no particular tangible reason. He alone was allowed to leave home, to experience the world, and to attend University. At the same time, those privileges came at the cost of Denis's ability to choose. Sacrifices were made on his behalf, but also without his permission.

Despite the fact that there is no evidence to give credence to the idea of Denis's superiority, and ample evidence to the contrary, the entire Geoghegan family, including the "soured" George and educated Baby, see Denis as their saving grace. They consent to the idea that Denis is not only smarter, but somehow more deserving than the rest of them, though no actual proof as to why is ever offered. Mrs. Geoghegan tells a story of the child's birth that offers some initial explanation. It was a difficult birth, with Mrs. Geoghegan's age playing a factor. She was sent to visit a "Dublin doctor," a social set that is both revered and feared by the peasant Geoghegans. The doctor whispered something into Mrs. Geoghegan's ear, something that she never shares with the audience or, as far as we know, the family proper, but it leads her, and consequently the rest of the family, to believe that Denis is superior and deserving, and that he will somehow rescue the family (ironic, since the family is far from in need of rescue) *if* the family can simply

sacrifice enough to make for Dennis the kind of life he would need to join the set of Dublin doctors that sent this family on their superfluous journey in the first place. Thus the Geohegans' "desire for respectability" is not the only "motive and excuse for all manner of hypocrisy" (*TCI*, 117). So, too, is their martyrdom. To an Irish audience that had, for the past fifteen years, glorified the bloody sacrifice alluded to in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the idea of martyrdom would have been sacrosanct. Robinson, however, demonstrates that martyrdom can in many cases mask cowardice.

Robinson's indictment of the Irish idea of sacrifice and martyrdom is clear throughout the play, with every character evincing some facet of this archetype. Denis is a type of martyr, or at least could be if he graduates from University and assumes responsibility for the family. The rest of the family have all given up their personal desires and aspirations for Denis. Yet this family is representative, rather than unique. It is all of Ireland that is conditioned to be martyrs for the sake of abstract others: those who have died in the famine, during the "troubles," or those who are sure to sacrifice in the future. Mrs. Geoghegan's brood not only sacrifices their own social and physical mobility for Dennis, they do it willingly. As a result of their unwillingness to "grow up," leave home, and become contributing members of their society, all are sacrificed *including* Denis, who is only a half-hearted student and a man desperate to be left alone.

Through Denis and the Geohegans, Robinson calls the audience to action by showing them an example of what they have chosen as their national iconic family – the "suffering peasant family" – and asks the audience not only to revolt against British oppression, but also to revolt against the confining constructions of Irishness they,



themselves created. The irony of this family's situation is epitomized by the fact that they are quick to condemn Dennis for not succeeding as a doctor. Instead he gambles, taking advantage of his family's generosity. The family, however, has also done its share of gambling. They've all gambled their futures: Baby with her education, George with his family's money, Jane with her future marriage, etc., simply on the possibility that Denis will be the savior, the "Dublin doctor." Even Dennis's nickname, the "whiteheaded boy," could easily be the name of a racehorse, and the two are meant to signify the same thing, a long shot bet that, odds are, will eventually disappoint. Robinson offers the audience no innocent parties here. Denis is a lazy boy who takes advantage of his family's willingness to finance his school and leisure activities, but only because his family forced him into an identity he didn't seek out or desire. The family is as unwilling to expend any real effort on their own behalf, to risk anything tangible in the service of their actual future, and instead hides at home "sacrificing" on the long-shot bet of the Whiteheaded Boy. Robinson asks them and the audience to grow up, to move out of the (metaphorical) peasant home, and to begin living their lives.<sup>211</sup>

### **The Falling Apart of the Old Order: *The Big House***

*The Big House* was written in 1926, after the Irish had officially won emancipation from the English and, at this point in Robinson's career and in Irish

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<sup>211</sup> Robinson took the opportunity his dismissal from the Abbey gave him to travel throughout the country, to see the peasant west and the supposedly cosmopolitan Dublin crowds, both interested in Irish independence, but both with very different needs to satisfy. In essence, Robinson was able to see the various permutations of Irish culture, and the damage that can be done by a conflict between ideology and experience. It is a lack of experience, and an overwhelming nostalgia for a lost, non-existent past that drove Yeats and the Abbey leadership to define both Ireland and Robinson's identities through lack, through absence, through paralysis and through suffering.

history, there were new concerns about the evolution of Irish identity. According to F.S.L. Lyons, the Free State “was intent upon the creation of an exclusively Gaelic-Catholic model” of identity construction.<sup>212</sup> Yet Robinson somehow was both nationalist and Protestant, revolutionary and a middle-class family man. In the quest to define Irishness, then, Robinson would have been uniquely situated to see the dangers of too concrete a characterization. He was able to bear witness to the fact that the process of inclusion also implicitly necessitates exclusion, and that any further exclusion of a portion of the Irish population would only prolong the damage done by English colonization. Many critics have dismissed his later work as evidence of his “demoralization,” his willingness to “assimilate[e] at any price” (*TCI*, 118). A careful reading of *The Big House*, however, shows an individual courageous enough to imagine an Irish environment hospitable to individuality, one that could accommodate not only the Catholic peasant and the Protestant landowner, but newer, evolving identities that would allow the country a living future.

There can be no mistake that Robinson’s relationship to both the nostalgia for adolescence and the desire to become an independent adult competed for importance in his life and artistic inspiration. In 1923, he accepted a reappointment by the Board of Directors to manage the Abbey Theatre, and he remained associated with that theatre until his death some 35 years later. He had been separated from his Abbey “family” for nine years by the time he wrote *The Big House*, making himself useful to Ireland and to the world of drama in ways outside the Abbey’s immediate influence. Yet he returned

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<sup>212</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland: 1890-1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), 165.

when asked. He returned, however, to a changed Theatre in a changed city. In 1909 he was Yeats's protégé and was, at least at first, the proverbial fair-haired boy. By 1923 he could not escape the cloud of Lady Gregory's displeasure, his embarrassment over the Edward VII incident, and his failed American tour. In 1909 he operated the Abbey Theatre at a time when independence was a goal and national identity was something yet to be achieved. He returned to the Abbey two years after Michael Collins signed the treaty removing British rule from the 26 southern counties. It's clear, then, how issues of nostalgia and a strange family dynamic might demonstrate themselves in his literary work produced at this particular time, such as it does in *The Big House*, which shows the tensions created by an institution that has outlived its time, a people searching for and yet unwilling to find a homogeneity they can understand as a national identity, and an individual dependent upon his or her immediate, physical surroundings in order to define a personal identity.

*The Big House* is, as its title indicates, a play about the Irish big houses and their owners' relationship to Ireland as a nation, to the Irish peasant populace, and their joint journey towards personal and national identity during the years immediately surrounding the declaration of Irish independence. Nicholas Grene defines the literary trope of the big house as an icon "doomed because its occupants have some inherent tendency towards self-destruction, whether through a willful blindness to what is going on around them, a failure to fulfill their class obligations to land and peasantry, or a betrayal of their caste by intermarriage or interbreeding with the native Irish" (*PID*, 174). Thus, the

icon of the big house is inherently conflicted. Either the owners of the houses are doomed because they mingle with the “native” Irish or because they refuse to.

Robinson’s story follows the experience of the Alcocks, a Protestant-ascendancy family that has, up until this point (at least they thought), shared a familial relationship with the surrounding peasant village. The play opens on Armistice Day in 1918 (a few years prior to the date of the play’s actual authorship and just prior to the declaration of national independence). The Alcocks, the owners of Ballydonal, are in the process of celebrating two things: the victorious end of England’s war against Germany, and the return of their son Ulick, a return made all the more special since they had been notified previously that their elder son, Reggie, had already been killed in the war. The celebration day, however, presents no cause for happiness for the family because it is then that the family discovers that Ulick, like his older brother Reggie, has also died. The Alcocks are immediately established as a family willing to sacrifice, to do their duty for the mother country, and to embody the identity of the Ascendancy class England has given them.

Mrs. Alcock is the only family member with a strong desire to keep her attachment to England. While entertaining Captain Despard of the Black and Tans<sup>213</sup> (someone who proves later to be an enemy rather than a friend), she claims that “Captain Despard will go back to England talking about us being so Irish. And I’m not Irish . . . I’m a Hampshire woman, a respectable Hampshire woman, in exile.”<sup>214</sup> “Irish,” then, is

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<sup>213</sup> The Black and Tans were World War I veterans who could not successfully reintegrate themselves into British civilian life, and therefore were sent to Ireland to quell uprisings.

<sup>214</sup> Lennox Robinson, *The Big House, Irish Drama: 1900-1980*, ed. Colín D. Owens and Joan N. Radner (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America P, 1990.), 288; hereafter cited as *BH*.

not perceived to be an ethnicity or an inherent identity. Instead, one exists on a sliding scale, with Irishness on one side and Englishness on the other, and least to Mrs. Alcock, with Englishness being the far preferable alternative. Mr. Alcock expands upon her position when he explains to Despard: “you mustn’t ‘enjoy’ us as if we were a comic story or a play. My wife would like you to take us as seriously as you’d take any country house in England” (*BH*, 299). Thus the real issue for the Alcocks is the relationship their unique “Irish” identity has to the derogatory “stage Irishman,” so often an object of ridicule on English stages. The Alcocks automatically assume that any authenticity or credibility their personalities might offer will, by nature of their affiliation with the Irish, be overshadowed by the constructed Irishness of the English stage. Though their house, the object that defines them, is most likely the largest, strongest and most obviously iconic in their geographical area, their national identity is the most mutable.

The position of the two Alcocks with regards to their identity and relationship to their homeland (both Ireland and England) are similar, though Mr. Alcock seems to be guilty of exactly the enjoyment against which he cautions Despard. Both Alcocks consider themselves to be *English* living in Ireland, but while Mrs. Alcock regards the whole experience as an inconvenience, Mr. Alcock displays more of the imperial perspective that produced the empire upon which the sun never set. He considers his 25 years in Ireland to be a grand adventure, a settling of the wild, and he enjoys his position as paterfamilias to the surrounding peasant villages. Drunken servants and villagers hoping for a loan of a few pounds, or a note of excuse to a local magistrate, all seem like

humiliating rustications to Mrs. Alcock. Mr. Alcock, on the other hand, sees them more as pastoral landmarks, those unique but foreign things that link him to the country as its captain, and thus delineate his identity. He is the explorer, and his home, Ballydonal, stands in place of the flag he would plant for England.

The relationship of the family to the countryside is more complicated for the Alcock children, since they were born in Ireland and therefore have a more difficult time negotiating their relationship to the land they consider home. Kate, the youngest child and only daughter, describes her relationship not just with Ireland, but also with the house itself, as “life” (*BH*, 303). For Kate, location determines identity, both individual and familial. Her family and her home provide the parameters of her identity. As a companion she has Ulick, who had been Kate’s twin in this respect. The two together provide the nuclear unit that promises to continue the operation of the family estate. Again, Robinson shows the audience a picture of an Irish family in many ways similar to the Geoghegans. They depend upon one another, as well as upon some greater external force, to define themselves both as individuals and as “Irish.” Both families, too, are martyrs for their cause and, as a result, suffer the utter destruction of that institution they thought their martyrdom supported.

In other words, the problem of both personal and national identity is even more complicated for the Ascendancy Irish because their relationship to their homeland is clouded by precarious political definition. “Home” if they are truly Irish means renting, being once removed from the land they occupy. “Home” if they are English means occupying the land, but as foreigners. Reggie, Kate’s brother and the eldest son (who

died earlier in the war), did not seem to fit in to her familial picture. While Reggie was alive, since he *was* the eldest son, he would have inherited the house. The English tradition of inheritance is continued in Ireland, which is ironic because it was this same tradition that put Mr. Alcock in Ireland in the first place. Rather than go into “foreign service,” a job to which he would have been much more suited, his destiny was decided for him by his birth. He was the eldest, and thus became a landowner (*BH*, 301).<sup>215</sup> The issue of patrilineal inheritance shows the audience yet another son, this time unfit rather than unwilling, to continue in his father’s footsteps. But even before Reggie’s death the two younger siblings had plans to rent Ballydonal from him, or manage it in his stead. They are unconcerned with the English right of the passage of property, and seek to become more like the Irish peasants, tenants in what was (at least up to this point) their family home.

Differing attitudes in the two sons reflect the conflicts over land and ownership in the Ascendancy class, as well as indicate the Ascendancy’s unique struggle with identity formation and assimilation. Reggie, perhaps because he was the eldest and thus probably the most directly influenced by his parents, was more English at heart. He joined the army immediately after he graduated from school, and died shortly thereafter. To this point Kate remarks, “I’m glad Reggie is dead, glad he died like that, honourably” (*BH*, 304). Reggie, like his parents, had no connection to Ballydonal in a personal way, in a way that might inspire homesickness if one were to leave it, and therefore dying for

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<sup>215</sup> The distinction here is important. Occupying the family’s land in Ireland, though in service of English dominion, was not considered to be foreign service – i.e. acting as ambassador to some *unoccupied* land. Ballydonnal was considered by the Alcocks and by England to be their home, even if the country that surrounded it, and the people who occupied *that* land, did not.

his country – for England – was preferable to a fate that would leave him trapped in Ireland, in a country and at a home he didn't consider to be his own. Ulick, however, remained outside the war until it became a matter of honor to join. His letters home demonstrated nothing *but* homesickness, and his return was greatly anticipated. Until his departure, he and his sister studied the operation of the house, but not as a manor to rule. They didn't collect rents or seek to expand their land holdings through convenient marriages. Rather, they studied farming until Ulick had to leave for the war. Thus, again, they treated the land as an Irish farming family would rather than as English landlords, and this impossible discrepancy left them defenseless and friendless once violence erupted around them.

Kate is further distinguished (perhaps because she is the only Alcock child the audience is allowed to meet) by her relationship to the land itself, rather than the national identity that the Anglo-Irish war (and World War I itself) worked so hard to define. As in Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* this heroine is a lone woman willing to sacrifice for her homeland, abandoned by her "friends" but remaining honorable in her pursuit. In response to Despard's query, "Good Lord, you're not a Nationalist, are you?" she replies "I thought fervent Nationalism was part of the make-up of your little gray-eyed Irish girl . . . But no . . . I don't bother about politics . . . [they] are a great nuisance" (*BH*, 304). She recognizes that external forces will always try to define her as a specific "type," the "gray-eyed Irish girl" or, conversely, the English heiress, but she concerns herself with what she wishes, which is to retain her connection to her house and her home(land), as *she* defines *it* and not as it is defined for her.



Kate presents an excellent example of the precarious balance Irish identity must strike between individuality and nationality. In *The Whiteheaded Boy*, Robinson created a family stunted by their inability to act as individuals, wholly dedicating themselves to a family and community identity that left them willingly powerless to control their own fates. In contrast, Kate acts completely independently of those around her, ignoring the obvious resentment of the villagers *and* the displeasure of her more English-identified peers in an effort to create a new type of island, one where all that matters is her personal desires and how those desires re/misinterpret the world around her. The impossible position Robinson presents as that of the Protestant ascendancy is rife with the sentimental nostalgia that allows the Alcocks, though they occupy an unstable position both politically and economically, to simultaneously become martyrs for England and for Ireland, for their nation as they choose to define it and for their way of life.

Throughout the play the audience is meant to see that the Alcocks are, as masters of the manor go, the best of all possibilities (they are the first to offer a loan, an extension on rent, Kate visits sick peasants in the village with flowers and home-baked bread), yet they still remain separate from the villagers themselves. They might be Irish, but they aren't the same kind of Irish as the Catholic peasants, and no amount of charity or kindness will change that. When a peasant is injured in the village, Kate visits. She recalls later to her parents that years before, she gave the hurt woman a dress for her wedding, and in return the family named their first child after Kate. Yet upon returning home to Ballydonal, after Mr. Alcock remarks "They're really part of the family, one of ourselves," Kate responds, "Not us, we're not them. That was the awful thing I realized

this evening . . . I knew Maggie better than any of them, and I – I was an outsider” (*BH*, 316). Mr. Alcock wants to integrate the peasant family into his world – into his personal conception of his Irish identity. He has adopted the idea of the Protestant landowner as a benevolent “father” to the peasant class and simply assumes that the peasants (highly idealized in his and the audience’s imagination) would consent to this inclusion. Kate, however, recognizes that the world does not adhere to these hyper-idealized (and extremely general) conceptions. For her there is no “they,” no universal “family” to which they all belong. Instead of impersonal pronouns and generic group titles, she repeats “I” several times, and uses the peasant’s name, Maggie. She recognizes the very real separation between the groups, as well as the separation between the world her father imagines and the world within which the Alcocks actually live.

Her father feels that perhaps, since death was the issue, religion was what made her feel different, but Kate responds with “religion . . . but lots of other things too; education, I suppose, and tradition, and everything that makes me me and them them” (*BH*, 316). Again Kate repeats the pronouns that separate her from the peasants outside the big house. Religion, education and tradition are all experiential; they exist on a sliding scale that can be used to highlight difference, but also similarity. Catholic and Protestant are still Christian, education can be experienced at different levels, but the basic tenants remain, and traditions such as weddings and funerals, though they may differ in detail, are quite similar in purpose and intent. However, the concept of “me” and the grouping of “them,” repeated in the lines for emphasis, underscores the importance of the inherent separation between the groups. No amount of theoretical

similarity can actually unite the Alococks with the peasants as “family.” Kate begins to realize that despite the fact that they had hoped to share a familial relationship with the villagers, their unique identities, “what makes them them,” keep them from sharing a unified, national character.

This mirrors the problem Yeats and the Abbey Theatre faced with their focus on the Celtic Twilight, especially after they’d reached a point in history where independence from England had been achieved. The theatre attempted to glorify an idealized peasant identity while at the same time retaining their right to preside *over* that identity; they hoped to remain both separate *and* together by ignoring the actuality of the Irish peasant and placing the control of the people in their own hands. They made the identity, and therefore they desired to retain their rule over it. However, this nostalgic construction was just that, a construction, and when the people came to see the magic mirror the Abbey promised to be, they couldn’t recognize themselves in what was reflected.

Kate’s realization of this discrepancy between the peasants and the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, coupled with the news of Ulick’s death, resigns her to keep Ballydonal in operation not so much because it is needed by the community (which might have been her perspective at the opening of the play) but rather *in spite* of the community. It is her singular relationship to her home that most distinguishes her from the rest of the characters in the play. Homesickness helps to define the notion of nostalgia, but one must first be separated from home in order to miss it. Separation, however, can be physical or metaphorical, and for both Kate and the audience, the separation is

metaphorical. She believed she was at home until events proved to her that her definition of home was false. This yielded an alienation, a distancing from home that forced her maturely to survey her situation. Rather than life in the fantastic pastoral world she and Ulick imagined, Kate realizes that her home is nothing more than a concept, an idea that was the product of her personality and *not* the bedrock of land and stone upon which a personality could be built. What she perceived as necessary sameness, a unity between herself, the villagers and the land, was actually an essential difference, and Robinson's insistence that both she and the audience face this difference is what gives Kate the courage to continue once her iconic home is destroyed.

The end of the play (and of Ballydonal and the Alcocks) is mixed in its emotional presentation. The villagers turn on the Alcocks, despite the Alcocks' repeated kindness to them.<sup>216</sup> Because the Alcocks refuse to support an English-initiated pogrom in the village, and because Kate refuses Despard's proposal of marriage, the family is bullied and denied protection by the Black and Tans. The villagers also retaliate against the Big House (rather than the Black and Tans), and burn Ballydonal to the ground. The Alcocks find themselves friendless, but also morally directionless, as their home burns. They considered themselves members of the community, and thus rebuked the Black and Tans for attacking "their" villagers. At the same time, however, to the villagers they symbolized something external and oppressive – England – and though the family was

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<sup>216</sup> Kindness, here, would of course be a subjective concept. From the peasants' perspective, anything that the Alcocks' owned would have first belonged to them, and thus would merely be the limited return of stolen property. From the Alcocks' perspective, though, they are landlords dealing with poverty-stricken tenants, and any gifts they give are given at their own expense, from a rapidly dwindling fortune, and vastly more generous than anything given by their aristocratic neighbors.

kept from harm, their home, the representation of their place within the community, was left to burn.

The peasants reject the Alcocks' imagined reality and demand control over their own identity, one in which they have the right to create and destroy old symbols at will. Their focus is on something new, on breaking away rather than resurrecting an imagined past, and it's this difference in perspective that most separates the village from the Big House. Ironically, then, just as Yeats and the Abbey intended, the villagers do instruct the audience on how to be Irish, but not through selfless sacrifice and abject poverty. Rather, they assume an identity and act on it, directing their action not in violence against people, but against icons once used to epitomize Ireland. The time had come for new definitions and new symbols, and Robinson had the old symbols act as the destroyers.

After the fire, the English-identified Alcocks immediately make plans to return to England. Though both the village and the Big House have been victims of English violence, the elder Alcocks, at least, realize that once the house that bound them to this land was destroyed, they were free to return to their *real* home. The more Irish-identified Kate, however, does not. She is not only determined to stay in Ireland, but to rebuild Ballydonal. She denies that it's for the sake of England *or* for the sake of Ireland, but rather says "I'll build it for myself. I'll build it with my own hands if I'm put to it. I believe in Ballydonal, it's my life, it's my faith, it's my country" (*BH*, 343). Kate, as much as possible, breaks away from both her national and familial affiliations in order to produce for herself something new, something that incorporates the nostalgia for

what it once was as an inspiration for what it might someday become. When she says she believes in Ballydonal, she means the right to Ballydonnal's existence on Irish soil, and the right of all Irish to occupy their Ireland, whether they fit into the current definition of "Irish" or not. She is joined in this endeavor by the ghost of Ulick, who appears only to Kate. Ulick gives Kate an object (one that takes the form of a powerless presence) to embody her nostalgia for an identity she can never again take to be herself, one in which she is the loved member of an Irish community. At the same time, though, it is this bitter loss of innocence and acceptance that fuels her desire to master her reality and create for herself an actual space in the land she insists is her home.

At the same time, the audience witnesses a representation of that which nostalgia most highlights, the search for an irrevocable condition. Kate's "bittersweet longing" for both places and people of the past keeps her in Ireland, and keeps her in the ruins of Ballydonal. She creates a hope for herself in both the imagining of Ulick's ghost, as well as in the possibility of rebuilding a house that matches the magnitude and size of the one that lives on in her imagination. She searches for an identity that cannot be destroyed, despite fire and war and the neglect of the community, as well for a brother who cannot be killed, despite a letter from the government or the presence of the ghost.

Robinson, at the point in his career when *The Big House* was written, returns also to his own Big House, the Abbey Theatre. Both Lady Gregory and Yeats drift away to other projects in the years following his return, but both of their ghosts can still be felt in the theatre today. Though the Abbey that Robinson returned to was far from a smoldering ruin, he did spend the remaining 35 years of his life, in one way or another,

trying to build and rebuild its authority as the national Irish theatre, working through drama to keep up the family tradition, so to speak. As Len Falkenstein writes in “Critical Remembering: Reading Nostalgia in Contemporary Irish Drama and Film,” much of contemporary Irish art embodies

a personal or collective longing for a sense of wholeness or authenticity – personal, cultural, national – located in the past, a longing that in some ways appears ideologically coded as fundamentally reactionary, but which is equally almost always cognizant of the futility of any attempt to recover what has been lost.

Robinson’s career both searched for and was that past, but at the same time, he epitomized an escape from that past. His return to the Abbey was characterized by two things. First, he remained the “keeper of the flame” of Irish drama for the next three decades. His plays nearly always involved a self-conscious depiction of the Irish peasant as a construct, and the problems that the ubiquitous construction caused for Irish identity. Secondly, he was famously experimental, deserving credit for “formulating the peculiar mix of idealism, romanticism, sentimentality, melodrama, realism, and hard-nosed satire that became the dominant mode among Abbey plays for several decades” (*LR*, 21). Thus Robinson, like Kate, kept a sentimental memory of what once was alive, but also used that memory to produce something new. The audience isn’t shown Kate’s success, but Robinson allows her final speech to end on a triumphant, if bittersweet note. Kate is happy, raising her lips to be kissed by what she imagines is the ghost of Ulick, back to help her rebuild Ballydonal. Therefore, like Robinson, she is determined to undertake the sometimes bitter and sentimental task of forming a new individual, adult identity in Ireland, but to undertake it alone in context with others, and never as a means

unto itself. In essence, she matures from adolescence to adulthood and though the process is painful, it is ultimately necessary.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: AN IRISH MOSAIC

I began this project with a specific metaphor in mind: for Irish men and women at the turn of the century, viewing nationalist plays was like looking into a mirror and not recognizing or accepting the reflection. I had read Lacan's work and his mirror theory of development, and it seemed to be an interesting theoretical model for approaching Irish plays. What I quickly learned was that psychology and nationalist drama, especially Irish nationalist drama, were inseparable. Instead of using a theoretical model to analyze an abstract and disconnected art, I found that if I was really going to understand the Abbey Theatre riots, I had to use a more inclusive approach. No person exists in a vacuum, and the same can be said for a political event, an historical rupture in expectations or behavior, or an interpretation of a meaningful piece of art. If I was going to better understand Ireland's search for national identity as it sought independence at the turn of the previous century, I had to learn more about the individuals who had a hand in writing and rewriting that definition.

"Knowing" Ireland is like "knowing" the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There are guidebooks one can purchase, and Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, Christopher Morash's *A History of Irish Theatre* and R.F. Foster's exhaustive biography of Yeats were all essential in this capacity. But as with any guidebook, these tomes were most helpful as introductions, maps to be used in locating areas of primary importance, rather than as a locus of answers to difficult, abstract questions. There was, of course, the art itself, and through close examination and careful analysis of the plays and their

respective historical contexts, some conclusions could be drawn. Also, however, what became painfully obvious was that one could not “know” Ireland, finalize it or package it in a well-defined and impermeable wrapper, any more than one could simply “explain” an art museum and its contents. Reading plays involves the same kind of process as viewing a painting, yet with the complexity multiplied by the issue of performance. Only so much can be gleaned from history and only so much can be taken from the text. The rest must come from context and from personal interaction.

I can’t help but think the same must have been true for viewing (or for that matter, producing) a play at the Abbey Theatre at its volatile first decades of operation. The mycelium of interconnecting power hierarchies, the different individual and group personalities all vying for prominence on that constantly developing stage, resulted in an event matrix that, to my knowledge, is singular and unique in the history of western drama. Through this research I do not hope to give a finalized portrait of Ireland and its vast and diverse people. Instead, I hope to add one more piece to the complicated mosaic that is an honest depiction of Irish personal and national identity.

That is not to say that conclusions cannot be drawn. On the contrary, I think that by combining historical events, biographical research and a close reading of several key works, some valuable conclusions can be made. First, Irish identity is slippery and elusive. To try to finalize a definition is to stunt the growth of a constantly evolving nation. Instead, one must note the roots, the ruptures where people demanded change and from what, exactly, they sought that change, and recognize that the process itself has no end point. Every generation and individual within it has its effect, and even when a

group may seem to be recoiling back into nostalgia, into an imaginary, safe intellectual space, the evolution of national identity continues. Secondly, personal and national identity formation cannot be separated into two distinct processes. Due to the unique political situation leading up to Irish independence and the subjugated state of all Irish people (to varying degrees but regardless of their class or economic distinction), an individual always existed in relationship to those other members of his or her class, as well as those who defined him or her by their difference. Finally, because of this constantly evolving state and this complicated interrelationship between the personal and the public, Irish stage drama bears a unique relationship to Ireland, and to critics seeking to analyze that country's unique body of art. The multiplicity of the Irish experience demonstrates itself most clearly in the consistent newness of repeated performances of its classic texts.

By examining the historical ruptures that resulted from the initial performances of those texts and comparing them to the texts themselves, documents that live outside of history until they are drawn back in by those who seek to reinterpret and re-perform them, researchers can witness the evolution of key ideas of Irish nationalism from their roots in personal experience, through the interpretive machine of the early Abbey audience, through ongoing transformations in modern presentations. An excellent example of this process is Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* that, throughout its extensive performance history, has gone from subversive inducement to riot to an "old favorite" frequently referenced and satirized by more recent Irish work. Another fine

example would be *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a play that, thanks to feminist critics, has been transformed from an icon of nationalism to a thorny negotiation of Irish femininity.

What I have learned most, then, is that in Ireland there is nothing truly “old,” and nothing really “new.” This realization is an incredibly exciting one from the point of the researcher, because it means that even well-known and oft-written about plays such as *The Countess Cathleen* can always be re-read and interpreted in an effort to glean more information about the mindset that created and received them. In addition, such a realization forces one to look at works that have, by previous critics, been dismissed as either unworthy or unproductive. Lennox Robinson’s vast library of plays is a monumental example of further opportunities for research in this field.

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